The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley

Marcus Dickey

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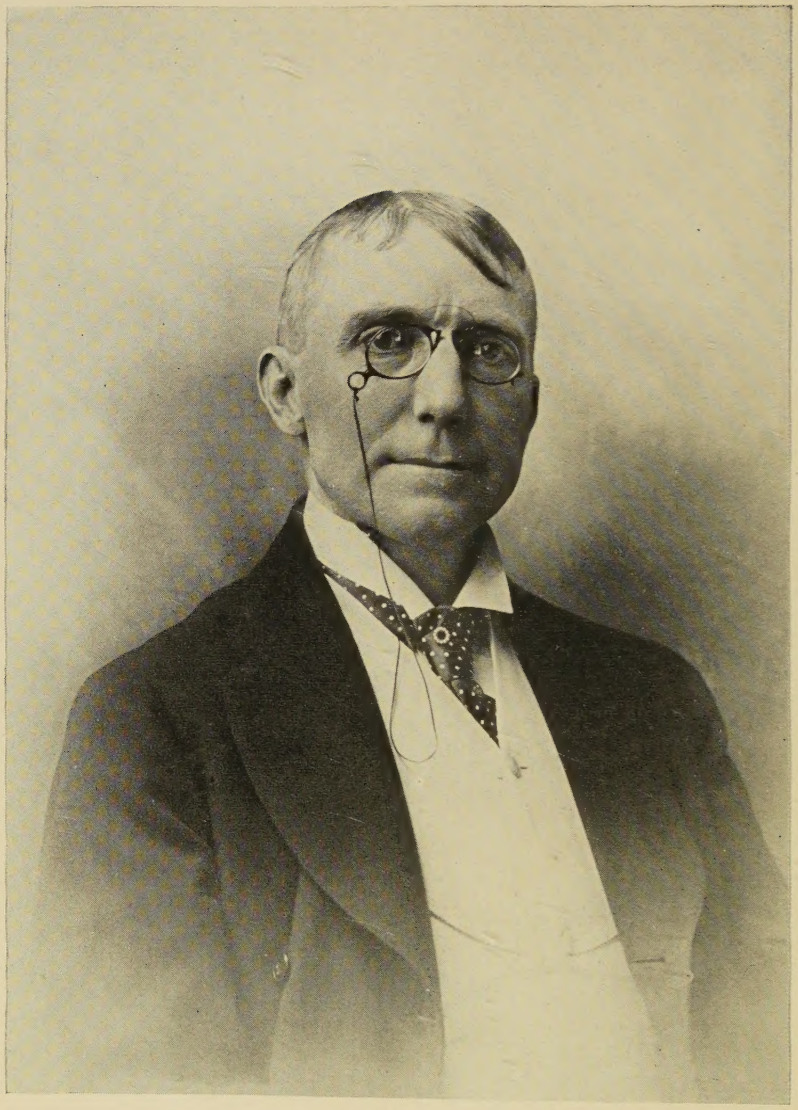

THE POET IN THE PRIME OF LIFE

THE MATURITY OF JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

Fortune's way with the Poet in the Prime of Life and After

By
MARCUS DICKEY

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS PAINTED
UNDER THE POET'S DIRECTION
By WILL VAWTER
AND REPRODUCTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHS,
MANUSCRIPTS AND RARE DOCUMENTS

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He who knows that power is inborn, that he is weak because he has looked for good out of him and elsewhere, and, so perceiving, throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly rights himself, stands in the erect position, works miracles.

So use all that is called Fortune. Most men gamble with her, and gain all, and lose all, as her wheel rolls.

—FROM EMERSON'S *Self-Reliance.*

FOREWORD

The author's first volume—*The Youth of James Whitcomb Riley*—according to friendly reviewers, has more than biographic value. "It is almost the story of the youth of Indiana," wrote a generous critic, "or the story of our great Middle West. Impelled by inherent individualism, the central figure rises from primitive beginnings, and, catching at apparently trivial, haphazard and often serio-comic opportunities, lifts itself in obedience to some secret spring of power within, and emerging at last into a gracious maturity, presents the spectacle of a strong, admirable personality, well worth the careful study and whole-hearted approval of a critical world."

This reviewer fittingly termed the story "Riley the Boy." And so this story of the poet's maturity may be termed RILEY THE MAN, and as such is offered to a friendly public with the enduring gratitude of

THE AUTHOR.

Heart of the Highlands
Nashville, Indiana,
June, 1922.

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	Early Ventures on the Platform	1
II	Distinction on Weekly Papers	23
III	The Fortune of Friendship	41
IV	With the Indianapolis Journal	56
V	Success on the Platform	77
VI	Literary Dens	100
VII	Waiting for the Morning	118
VIII	Story of His Pen Names	141
IX	His First Book	157
X	On the Platform in the 'Eighties	172
XI	On the Banks of Deer Creek	201
XII	The Silver Lining	215
XIII	The Unique Combination	234
XIV	The Beauty of Forgiveness	257
XV	The Poet at Forty	273
XVI	Anchorage in Lockerbie Street	286
XVII	Poems Here at Home	300
XVIII	The Unfailing Mystery	314
XIX	Building Books	337
XX	A Patriotic Civilian	353
XXI	Last Days on the Platform	369
XXII	In the Hearts of the People	389
	Index	415

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The Poet in the Prime of Life	*Frontispiece*	
Old Schoolhouse at Monrovia—Now a Sawmill—Scene of the Poet's First Public Reading	*Facing page*	10
The Greenfield Adelphian Club and Band Wagon	"	11
Robert J. Burdette, Who Introduced the Poet to the Lecture Platform	"	44
Myron W. Reed, from a Portrait by T. C. Steele	"	45
Judge E. B. Martindale, Proprietor of the Indianapolis Journal—1875	"	60
John C. New, Proprietor of the Indianapolis Journal in the 'Eighties	"	61
George C. Hitt, Publisher of the Poet's First Book	"	94
Senator Harry S. New, from a Photograph Taken While an Officer in the Spanish-American War	"	95
The Old Journal Building, Northeast Corner of Market and Pennsylvania Streets, Indianapolis	"	122
Cover for the Poet's First Book in Prose—The Boss Girl	"	123
The Poet in 1886, the First Year He Included *Little Orphant Annie* in His Public Readings	"	150
A Boyhood Memory, the Old Swimmin'-Hole in Brandywine Creek—1860	"	151
Old Seminary Homestead, Greenfield—the "Crow's Nest"	"	178
Kingry's Mill, Where Pioneers "Tuck Their Grindin'" in the Fall of 'Forty-Three	"	179

On the Banks of Deer Creek, Beloved Scenery Which Inspired *Knee-Deep in June* and Other Poems . . . . *Facing page* 206
Old Settlers' Meeting at Oaklandon, Marion County, Indiana—1878 . . . " " 207
The Poet and His Devoted Friend, Joel Chandler Harris . . . . . " " 236
From a Portrait of the Poet by His Life-Long Friend, T. C. Steele . . . " " 237
William P. Fishback, "Who with the Greatest Zest Shared with the Neediest" . . . . . " " 262
From Original Manuscript with Illustration. The Poem Written on the Assassination of President Garfield . " " 263
The Poet, His Nephew, Edmund Eitel, and Hamlin Garland at the Greenfield Homestead—1894 . . . . " " 290
Home in Lockerbie Street, 1880, the Year the Poet Wrote *Lockerbie Street* . . " " 291
Greenfield the Morning After Lee's Surrender at Appomattox . . . . . " " 318
The Old Masonic Hall, Greenfield, to Which the Poet Returned for a Public Reading in 1896 . . . . . " " 319
The Poet in 1896 . . . . . " " 346
At the Hancock County Fair, 1865, a Memory of Early Days in the Poet's Child-World . . . . . " " 347
From a Portrait of the Poet by John S. Sargent . . . . . " " 374
Traveler's Rest, the Tavern on the Old National Road, Philadelphia, Indiana —1850—a Memory . . . . . " " 375
From a Photograph of the Poet in His Latter Years—1913 . . . . . " " 402
Henry Watterson—Age Seventy-Eight—a Staunch Friend of the Poet for Thirty Years . . . . . " " 403

THE MATURITY OF JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley

CHAPTER I

EARLY VENTURES ON THE PLATFORM

AS shown in *The Youth of James Whitcomb* Riley the poet had a clear vision of his mission as a writer of verse. In connection with that mission, his early days revealed another phase of his future, foretold his genius as a public entertainer.

It was the third scene in the fourth act—a railroad station at Shrewsbury Bend. To the right is an unpainted shed with a broad platform around it, a door at the side, and a window in front. There is a clump of shrubs near a tree on the left. A railroad track crosses at the rear, and back of it in perspective is a view of Shrewsbury River in the moonlight. There is a switch with a red lantern and a coat hanging on it; a signal lamp and post beside it, and there are numerous packages on the platform when the scene opens. The Signal Man, whistling as he works, is wheeling a barrel toward the shed when a beautiful girl of nineteen steps into the moonlight and seats herself beside the tree. She has fled from her lover at Long Branch a few miles distant, and is intent on catching a train for New York, but there is no

train till morning. Moved by her distress, the Signal Man decides to aid her, so, after storing the packages, conceals her in the station shed for the night. Locking the door safely, he goes to the switch, puts on his coat and looks at his watch. The "Night Express" from New York is due in ten minutes. He walks around the shed with his lantern, goes to the track again, looks up and down the shining rails, lights his pipe, and then walks off to his shanty in the village.

Then things begin to happen: A friend of the young woman (a veteran of the late Civil War), puts in an appearance, is seized by a robber and bound with a rope to the railroad track—then the faint whistle of the locomotive and the rumble of the oncoming train—the frantic fright of the young woman, who batters down the shed door with an ax and rescues her friend in the glare of the headlight as the "Express" roars by.

Such, inadequately outlined, is a scene from Augustin Daly's famous old play, *Under the Gaslight*, a picturesque drama of life and love "in these times"—the times being the early 'seventies of the last century. The play had been booked for a one-night stand at White's Hall, Marion, Indiana. For a week it had been heralded as "the great New York sensation," with a railroad scene guaranteed to raise the audience "to the highest pitch of excitement."

Then a calamity befell: the Signal Man of the company was taken ill! What was to be done? Riley's friends, knowing his ability, suggested him to the manager, and he was asked to play the part. He consented with the understanding that he be allowed to portray character as he conceived it. Discovering

that the "property" coat was not realistic, he borrowed one from a local "section man"; also a pair of wrinkled boots and a "run-down" hat. Riley was twenty-three at this time, but in the guise of the switchman he looked sixty. Since his dialogue was with the young woman only, he gave her the cue for reply by a simple and self-designed turn of the index finger, which she alone understood, thus affording him opportunity to introduce features not in the original text. His lines were brief, but as he went on improvising here and there, talking naturally as an old man would talk, the audience listened with rapt attention, and when at last, muttering and smiling deliciously to himself, he trudged off the stage, the hall grew stormy with applause.

Quite early in his young manhood Riley was aflame with the desire to be an actor, just as Louisa Alcott was "violently attacked" by the same mania. With slight change in his purpose, the desire led him on through struggles and failures to success as a public reader. When but six years old, his mimicry often shocked his parents, for he frequently displayed it at the wrong time. A year or so later his mother listened in amazement to his recital of the chatter of a strolling Bohemian, who was picking up a living on the street with a cage of trained canaries.

In April, 1870, Riley made quite a hit as Charles Fenton in *Toodles,* but when, two or three years later, his success as Grandfather Whitehead in *The Chimney Corner,* and Troubled Tom in *A Child of Waterloo,* became the talk of the town, he began to dream of a wider field. A friend wrote him from the West, "a tragi-comic friend," said Riley, "who wore a black

frock-coat to look like Hamlet. He had the stage fever as I had, but he also had what I lacked—the money to reconnoiter in new fields." According to the friend, there were two flattering prospects. In the first, Riley might *star* in Second Comedy on an Omaha circuit. The second was a probable engagement at the Olympic Theater, St. Louis, at fifteen dollars a week. "I really believe," said Riley, "that I could have made good in St. Louis, but it soon turned out that I had the wrong pig by the ear."

One Saturday evening the Harry Gilbert Company entertained a Greenfield audience, in "the very laughable farce, *The Rough Diamond.*" The company was assisted by "well-known local talent," including Captain Lee Harris and J. W. Riley. Here was Riley's first experience with that autocrat, the stage manager. "I once thought I could be an actor," was his comment twenty years later, "but I found they would not let me. For instance, traditions of the stage would never permit me to stand with my hands in my pockets. I thought there were exceptions. Whenever I saw a chance to do some good acting, something that would be natural, the autocrat would scream out, 'Here! that's not the way to do that! You come in at *this* entrance; you stand *there;* you do *this* way, and *that* way.' Being always in hot water at rehearsals, I found it impossible to be natural at the performance. My heart was not in it. It was all on a false basis. Sometimes I would talk back. 'No man ever said that that way,' I would retort. 'It is not truthful, and it will not go.' 'No matter,' returned the autocrat, 'you do it the way I tell you. I've got to look out for the proper effect.' I soon saw they would not let me

be an actor. An actor, according to the old story of Peg Woffington, *really personates,* which your mere man of the stage never does. A grain less may be good speaking, fine preaching, high ranting, and eloquent reciting, *but I'll be hanged if it's acting.*"

One property man's advice, however, was not forgotten. "Say, Riley," he said at a rehearsal, "you have a trade, haven't you? You can make two or three dollars a day, I suppose." Riley told him that he could. "See here," said he, "why waste time in failure on the stage? Stick to your trade. You do not know it, but there are people in this company working for nothing. Half the time none of us get our pay. Take my advice and go back to your trade." Riley took the advice; he quit the company; for years he painted signs for a living. Nevertheless he loved the members of the dramatic profession. "They are big-hearted people, charitable and noble," said he.

The poet's debt to the stage was noteworthy, and it was always gratefully remembered, but the memories were of the days when he painted the scenery for the Greenfield Dramatic Club and acted after his own fashion. It was his interest in the stage that led him to think about the relation of a character to those who should hear that character speak. Thoughts should not be foreign to a character if they were to impress the audience. The scene and the words must harmonize. Soon he discovered that what an author writes must be in concord with the reader's knowledge of the facts. He gained a local reputation by reciting "The Vagabonds," "The Village Blacksmith," and other selections at "modest little gatherings" and home concerts, "but," to quote his own words, "very soon

I was up a stump." He found in reading a poem or reciting a story from some book, that he could not do it well because it was not naturally written. He tried to mend the faulty lines but soon found that would not work. The difficulty suggested two questions: First, How can you express a thought naturally unless it is phrased naturally? And second, Why not write something yourself and see whether it will take? Answering the second question he wrote several dialect poems, but for some time was careful not to claim them as his own, under the impression that there was a prejudice against home-grown poets. He avoided the sing-song delivery and spoke his lines as if they were spontaneous statements of facts. "Here is a selection," he would say to the audience, when about to recite one of his own verses, "that I found in a worn-out newspaper," and "Here is another from a magazine," and so on. Whenever a poem made a hit he saved it, improved it, and added it to his permanent list—and when there were no signs of approval he "buried the production." He was not then writing for publication. To quote him again, he "never expected to see in print one half of what he wrote." In due time he had the courage to acknowledge the authorship of his poems. It was the familiar experiment of Robert Burns—"trying a poem on the public to see if it would take."

"How did I become a poet?" Riley smiled at his interviewer. "I just drifted into it through the natural course of events. I wanted to be an actor—had a wild craving for the stage—but that's a mighty rocky road to travel. The nearest thing in that line I could do was to give public readings. Now, there

is plenty of good elocutionary talent, but the people soon tire of the regular selections. So I concluded it might be a taking thing to have an original program.

"Then I took part in the blue ribbon movement," Riley continued; "wrote temperance poems and gave temperance entertainments in company with other speakers. One of my best was the story of a reformed saloonkeeper, who was bothered by the women who prayed in front of his house. He shut himself in and drank to *delirium*, and was finally rescued by a veiled lady—his wife in disguise—who prayed before his door day after day. No, I never published the poems; I was not publishing in those days."

In his "Buzz Club Papers," 1878, Riley in the guise of "Mr. Bryce," set down his introductory remarks when reading an original poem in Greenfield—a memory it was of the charming effect produced on the members of a local lodge. "'I lay no claim to that immortal gift of song,'" said Mr. Bryce, "'yet I trust that what I shall offer you to-night may serve at least the purpose for which it is designed, namely, that of pleasing rather as a sketch of character than as a work of art. Although I feel that it falls short of the requirements of strict imitation, it was projected in that spirit, and weak as it is, I must present it, reserving however the right to claim it as my own in case the model remains undiscovered.'

"With this little whiff of pleasantry," runs the account in the "Club Papers," "Mr. Bryce bowed his smiling face an instant from sight. Then lifted it again, grown old and wrinkled as by enchantment, and in a voice grown husky as with age, recited with life-like simplicity the homely romance of 'Farmer

Whipple—Bachelor.'" The poem was received with an outburst of genuine enthusiasm.

Riley's dream of being an actor faded, but there remained the hope of success on the platform. He was his own master in the interpretation of his poems —no autocrats in his path—just dark days—failures —then sunlight—and triumph.

"Dickens is giving a series of farewell readings in England, which attract attention beyond all precedent. People go from town to town in the vain hope of getting seats before they are sold." This news item Riley read in the Greenfield *Commercial* when he was twenty years old. It served to clinch some remarks by Tom Snow, the "Greenfield Socrates" who had taught Riley to love Dickens. The old Shoemaker had dreams of a day when Riley would impersonate some of Dickens' characters. "You want to be an actor," he had said, looking up to Riley from his bench; "Dickens is an actor; he is as successful on the boards as he is between them. No greater actor in England; I do not except Macready. Dickens reads from his own books, Macready from Shakespeare; why not Riley from Dickens?" Dickens had gone to the theater nearly every night for three years to study acting. According to the Shoemaker, the novelist had been astoundingly successful in readings from the *Carol*, the *Chimes* and *Pickwick*—successful because he was a great actor.

Riley was deeply impressed and Dickens at once became his platform inspiration, just as Longfellow became his patron saint in poetry. He began to impersonate rustic characters; to assume the name of Jones or Smith and invent a family of relatives and

attach to them various characteristics—virtues and vices.

The summer of 1874 marked Riley's first appearance as a sole performer. It was at Monrovia, Morgan County, Indiana, then a lively little place of four hundred inhabitants. "I picked out a village far from home," he said, "so that if I failed nobody would hear of it. By the almanac I was twenty-five, but as a booster of entertainments, callow as celery in a tile. Still sticking to my trade, I was hanging round a paint shop in Mooresville. When business was dull I loafed at the photograph gallery and wrote articles for the Mooresville *Herald.* Sometimes the *Herald* was out of space; then I just loafed around the gallery. The elocution bee was buzzing in my bonnet, and having created a furor by reciting to a few friends in a parlor one night, I concluded to cut loose and try it alone. Nobody would know me over there in the cross-roads village, and I fancied that I might make quite a hit as The Greatest Imitator and Caricaturist of the Age. So I rolled up some paint brushes in long sheets of white paper from the *Herald* office, borrowed a hat and a guitar, threw a light overcoat over my arm, and like Obidah, the son of Abensina, went forward to see the hills rising before me. I remember that my overcoat was rather shabby, but by turning it wrong-side out the lining gave it a tolerable appearance, as it hung on my arm. After walking a short distance, the hack came along, an old covered quail-trap that plied between the towns. I gave the driver forty cents and about noon he landed me safely at the little tavern in Monrovia."

It was Tuesday. After dinner Riley sought out the

trustees who promptly promised him their "meeting-house" for an entertainment Wednesday evening. Returning to the tavern, he painted hand-bills and a few large posters with his name in big red letters at the top. One poster displayed the word COMEDIAN, and was illustrated with a picture of a fat man holding his sides and laughing, presumably, at the comedian's witticisms. "Judging from the band of children that followed Riley as he tacked up his bills," said the Monrovian marshal many years after, "one would have thought he was the biggest man in town—and he *was*."

It was a windy afternoon and the bill-posting had been disagreeable business, but Riley was happy. In those days it did not take much to make him happy, or miserable either. "In the shank of the evening" he was sitting in front of the tavern, feeling that he had earned his night's rest, when a tall, lank man approached him.

"You're the fellow that's goin' to give the show?" he asked.

"A literary entertainment," replied Riley. He did not like to have it called a show.

"Your hand-bills stuck up round town?" asked the man.

"Yes, sir—my posters," returned Riley.

"Well, you can't have the church; the trustees didn't know you wuz a comedian."

This made Riley feel, he said, as if he had been caught stealing. He tried to make the lanky gentleman understand that he wasn't going to cut "monkey-shines," and that he would not injure the people morally. In vain he pleaded; no show of that sort in "our church"—and that settled it.

Old Schoolhouse at Monrovia—now a Sawmill—Scene of the Poet's First Public Reading

THE GREENFIELD ADELPHIAN CLUB AND BAND WAGON—1874

The next place for the entertainment was the schoolhouse, and this was promised for Thursday evening. Wednesday morning Riley distributed revised handbills. This time there were not so many "curly-cues" on them, nor did he whistle and sing as he had done the day before. He began to feel as if the whole venture would "fizzle." In the afternoon he was tuning his guitar and practising his songs, when a stranger knocked at his door.

"You are the showman, are you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," was the prompt answer. Riley was not so particular about it being called a literary entertainment as he had been the day before.

"Well," said the man, "you'll have to pay a license before you can sell tickets."

"How much is the license?"

"Two dollars."

Riley had but a dollar left. The admission was to be ten cents and feeling certain the receipts would not cover the expenses, Riley quickly decided to make it a free show. So he hurried a third time over town and painted on the posters—ADMISSION FREE.

When night came the little schoolhouse was full—full of noise and disappointment. "It was a crowd of thoughtless children," to quote again the town marshal, "the ragtag and bobtail of the neighborhood, and a gang of rough fellows from Adams Township, who happened to ride to town that night." The "little sprinkling" of men and women who frowned on the disorder did not count.

Interspersing his comic selections with such musical favorites as "Kathleen Mavourneen" and "Silver Thistle," Riley strove to gain a respectable hearing, to

make his audience respond, the while his own heart was breaking. The response to "The Mocking Bird" with his own variations was a sickening jumble of hisses and cat-calls. The effect on him is indescribable. His own words give a glimpse of his agony: "The groans of confusion," said he, "were blotched and patched with scraps of sound torn from tunes that demons dreamed. For the moment I thought I would break down, but keeping a stiff under-lip upside down, as a brother actor once admonished me, I stuck to it and finished my program with 'Pulling Hard against the Stream.'"

As Riley sat down, the village blacksmith rose: "You fellows," he said abruptly, "have had your fun with this young man and I think you've hurt his feelings. He has done his best to please you, and he has given us a pretty good show. I move we pass the hat." Dropping two *bits* in for good luck, he passed his hat through the crowd himself. This little act of approval touched Riley tenderly; it was a kind-hearted crowd after all, and he smiled—"as the sun smiles through the mists of morning."

The blacksmith had his own way of referring to the collection. "When I tell you what was in that hat," he once groaned, "it makes me want to roll my overalls up above my knees and kick that gang from Monrovia to Mud Creek. There was everything in it—beans and pebbles, nails and screws, tobacco quids, buttons, pieces of a door-knob and a wishbone—and *money?*—just forty-eight cents."

The blacksmith also spoke of the effect on Riley. "There are some feelings," he said, "that just have to be let alone; they have to describe themselves. It

seemed to me that Riley went to his room as if begging his own pardon for having been born a man instead of a dog. The next morning he rolled up his paint brushes and his guitar and leaving his overcoat as security for his board bill plodded his weary way back to Mooresville."

For Riley it was Black Friday. Four days before, the scenery had been beautiful—the growing corn, the orchards, the beech and walnut groves, and the old mill. Now things were dark and dreary. "I remember," said he, "that the moaning of a dove across a stubble field was ineffably sad. It was like the yearning cry of a long-lost love. Although the sun was shining, the weather seemed dispiriting. It was noon when I came in sight of Mooresville, yet the church spires seemed to peer through a coming darkness."

Monrovia saw Riley no more. "It would be fine," he said, when at the summit of his platform triumphs, "to spend a day at the little brown boarding-house under its duck-bill roof. I would like to see the old couple who kept it, flying about to prepare the spare room for me and an extra place at the table. I would like to ask them where they hung my overcoat. But I can't go back to Monrovia, and besides I can't read 'Farmer Whipple' and 'Tradin' Joe' any better now than I did then."

"When Fate desires a great success, she sends her chosen one failure," some one observes. "So she sent failure to Sol Smith Russell," said Riley, "and Joseph Jefferson, and Mary Anderson. Russell gave an entertainment over in Illinois, and the boys drove him to the river. Jefferson when a boy came with a poor,

little itinerant troupe to an Indiana town. The players could not pay the license for the opera house. So they called their play a concert and gave it in an empty pork house, little Joe singing comic songs by the light of a tallow candle. Mary Anderson had always seen the stage across the footlights. It was the most glittering, romantic place in the world. But when she saw it from the alley entrance, with just one dingy gas-jet burning in the center, the romance turned to blank despair, and she trudged home through the rain to hide herself and find relief in tears. It is all very well," Riley concluded, "for the people to laugh at our expense, but there are not so many comic songs in a pork-house entertainment as they think. No more Monrovia in mine!"

Riley returned to Greenfield, knowing all sorts of secrets and never telling them. Although he avoided reference to Monrovia, he did not forego his ambition. Accordingly he hung out his sign in front of his shop: FANCY PAINTER, DELINEATOR AND CARICATURIST.

In 1875, having recovered from the shock at Monrovia, the Delineator and Caricaturist was persuaded to tempt fortune again. This time he did not do his own boosting but had a manager beat the drum. Riley thought it should be a little tour through the "penny-royal circuit" of Central Indiana. The manager had his eye on the big towns. So, for a beginning, they chose Anderson, Lebanon and Crawfordsville. Riley opposed the "big towns" because he had nothing to wear. To ease his mind on that score, the manager went his security for a fine black suit and a high-crowned black hat. The bills were printed in a neighboring town to keep the details of the tour a secret

from the home-folks. One bill, a yard long, ran as follows:

RILEY
THE
AUTHOR,
HUMORIST
AND
RECITATIONIST!
Will give one of his
NEW AND
original
Entertainments!
at
Anderson, Saturday Evening, July 3 (1875)
The Programme will consist of Selections,
HUMOROUS AND PATHETIC,
From our best writers, together with
ORIGINAL RECITATIONS,
character sketches and
POPULAR BALLADS.

This Young and Talented Artist is particularly pleasing and happy in everything he attempts, having a keen appreciation of the Mirthful Side of LIFE, alloyed with a fine Poetic Sense. He is a True Student of

THE GREAT MASTER—NATURE.

His powers of Mimicry are free from all the strain of rant and the mock heroic. Easy, graceful, thoroughly at "home," he holds his throne, the rostrum and reigns

SOVEREIGN OF ALL PASSIONS.

Without the artifice of dress, or trickery of paint, he stands a child of five, or a tottering old man. His facial capabilities seem inexhaustible, enabling him to look the thought he speaks and mirror back to Life its

EVERY PHASE OF CHARACTER!

Cultured and refined, with a true conception of the MORAL and the GOOD, he suffers no low jest or vulgar thought to desecrate his worth.

HE HAS MET WITH THE MOST FLATTERING SUCCESS WHEREVER HE HAS APPEARED, the more especially in his ORIGINAL READINGS AND HUMOROUS PERSONATIONS.

Don't Fail to See AND HEAR HIM

Admission . . . . . 25 Cts.

O. H. P. MOORE,
General
MANAGER.

Jeffersonian Job Print, Franklin, Ind.

Borrowing an old rockaway for the trip, Riley and his manager drove across country to Anderson. The program for the evening was essentially the same as that given at Monrovia—recitations, and music by himself on the guitar. The door receipts were fifteen dollars, hall rent ten dollars, other expenses eight dollars—*dead loss,* three dollars.

On Sunday there was a lack of necessary funds. The rockaway had been sent home. "The next day," said Riley, "there being a hitch between me (party of the first part) and my manager and my thorn in the flesh (party of the second part), I boarded the Accommodation, and at night crept into Greenfield with a hang-dog look that would have done credit to a man floundering in the swamps of Tipton County."

Riley attributed the failure to *over*-advertising and *under*-proficiency. "Sovereign of all Passions!" he groaned—when rereading his bill twenty years after the failure—"and that monstrous line, The Mirthful Side of Life, alloyed with a fine Poetic Sense, *alloyed* (debased by mixing); great God! what stupidity! That damned the venture. I marvel that our old rockaway was not shattered by a thunderbolt.

"It is never safe," he went on, "to gloss the facts. You can no more deceive the people than live-stock boosters can trick the farmers. No, no, it will not work. To sail under false colors is to invite defeat. You can not deceive Mr. Truth. He will spot you as surely as Mark Twain spots a sham."

The Anderson *Democrat* thought Riley's entertainment was a credit to him. It showed unmistakable evidence of dramatic talent and literary taste of a high order, which only needed to be properly cultivated to place him in the front rank. The *Herald* said the audience was small. Several of the recitations were fairly creditable; but want of training was apparent in every effort. The *Herald* commended to Mr. Riley a liberal use of a life-size mirror, midnight oil and the instruction to be had from a competent drill-master. "There's millions in it."

On recovering from his *second* failure, Riley took the *Herald's* admonition to heart. He remembered how Dickens walked about the fields, practising four and five hours a day, and he gave heed to his motto: "No Day Without a Line."

For two years, beginning with 1876, he had his way about reciting in the churches and schoolhouses of small towns. So doing, the hall rent would be nominal and the audience usually sympathetic. Occasionally there would be some hitch in the advertising, then "the house would be dark" and there would be left but one alternative—the return to Greenfield without funds. "More than once," was his word, "I dodged the tollgate and slipped into town by a circuitous route."

The humorous predominated in his readings. "My lecture on Funny Folks," he wrote his Schoolmaster in October, 1876, "is nearly complete." He got his cue from the annual forecast of talent for the lecture platform. The bureaus were calling for humorists. Petroleum V. Nasby was to tell about "Betsey Jane." Mark Twain was to describe "Buck Fanshaw's Funeral" and tell his whistling story. Eli Perkins was to lecture on the "Philosophy of Fun." The Danbury News Man was to read from his "Life in Danbury," and Josh Billings from his "Almanac." Last and not least, Riley's favorite, Bret Harte, was to be in the field with "Progress of American Humor."

By the beginning of 1878, Riley had gained sufficient strength and popularity to stand alone. Committees usually relieved him of the cares of printing and distributing circulars. "Come to the Court House Tonight," invited the hand-bills for Newcastle. "Don't

Forget Riley—*That Leedle Boy of Mine.* Music by the Cornet Band." At Lewisville, Indiana, the Presbyterian Church was crowded. "The entertainment was pleasing and profitable to all." Riley remembered that on this occasion the admission fee was ten cents and his share of the receipts four dollars. "Imagine the sensation!" said he, "four dollars for a hungry poet! I ran down street to a candy store and bought enough gingerbread to wall a well."

At Kokomo a week later, favorable winds began to blow. There the Hoosier Delineator and Humorist won fame in a single night. Thenceforward his prominence in the lecture field was assured. The initial step was taken by the Humorist himself as shown in a letter to his friend, J. O. Henderson:

Greenfield, Indiana, January 24, 1878.

Dear Henderson:

Noticing the paragraph in to-day's *Dispatch* that anything from *Julius Caesar* to a second-class cancan would catch your show-going people just now, I write to ask what chances I would have there with Original and Select Readings. I shall have my program complete and ready for presentation to the public in a few days. I desire to answer *invitations* only. The reason of course will be obvious to you. Can you work up such a thing for me in Kokomo? I believe I can safely promise to entertain your amusement-loving people—provided I can get enough of them together. If you can do this for me I will not forget the favor. If you think an appearance there would not be feasible, say so, and I will seek fresh fields and pastures new.

Most gratefully yours,

J. W. Riley.

Five months before, Kokomo had been the scene of the explosion of that literary torpedo, the Poe-Poem hoax. Feeling that the poet had suffered long enough the community resolved to make amends and the way it did it was capital. The entertainment was announced from all the church pulpits, and all church social gatherings were postponed. Tickets were sold at the Opera House, the Post Office, a drug store and a book store. The *Dispatch* guaranteed a good audience. It announced that the poet would give a select reading "by special request of our leading citizens." The entertainment would "be one that *entertained*." Handkerchiefs would be needed. "Let us give the author of 'Leonainie' a rousing reception." The *Tribune* announced the poet as "a young man of great intellectual endowments. February 14 (1878) would be his first appearance before a Kokomo audience." On Wednesday hand-bills declared that the poet "was a complete master of the humorous and pathetic," and that he could tangle these elements "till you would laugh at grief and weep at mirth." Thursday more bills were distributed:

J. W. RILEY TO-NIGHT

Whoever fails to hear Riley will be sick to-morrow, when the praises of his readings, imitations and perfect dialect stories will be the talk of the town.

The result was just what the *Dispatch* promised, a "good audience." Riley had agreed to read for a nominal sum. "Tell it not in Gath," he wrote the committee; "I will come for five dollars." When the

net receipts totaled seventy dollars, he felt (to use his own words) as if he had cracked his powers of invention.

He was exceptionally happy in his program, due doubtless to care in preparation and to the inspiration of the audience. "The Jolly Old Pedagogue" (a poem by the youthful George Arnold) afforded him an opportunity to impersonate old age, the rôle that had made him so popular in *The Chimney Corner*. The boys and girls of fifty years ago, if still living, will remember the sunshiny smiles on the wrinkled old face, and how the pedagogue chuckled and prattled—

"I'm a pretty old man," he gently said,
"I have lingered along while here below;
But my heart is fresh, if my youth is fled,"
Said the jolly old pedagogue long ago.

Riley had not yet gained sufficient courage always to acknowledge the authorship of his own poems. "Out in the provinces," he said, "I could admit I was a poet, but in a population of three thousand it was different." At one point in the program, after reciting "The Lily Bud" by Anna Poe (a little rural picture in which the birth of a child reconciled two neighbors who had been chronic enemies), he disguised his authorship of one of his own poems as follows: "Here is a selection," he said, taking it from his inside coat pocket, "which a friend of mine threw into the waste-basket. He disliked to acknowledge it, but I don't mind telling you that he was a follower of Wegg, that is, sometimes he dropped into poetry. If you will lend me your ears I will read you this specimen of his versification"—on which he recited from memory his beau-

tiful "Dream of Christmas," now entitled "Das Krist Kindel."

So he continued through the program, reading many of the poems that later in his books and on the platform brought him fame.

This highly successful Kokomo evening marks the turn in the tide for Riley as a public reader. In March he received fifteen dollars for a "lecture" at Tipton, and the same, a week later, in Noblesville. Admirers began to write their friends about him, and the Indianapolis *Journal* was gratified that "the Hoosier Poet is getting talked about and quarreled over—a sure sign that there is something in the man."

Thus, at the beginning of 1878, Riley was vastly encouraged "by the brightness of the track on which he had to throw his little shadow."

CHAPTER II

DISTINCTION ON WEEKLY PAPERS

FOR two years, beginning in 1878, Riley was a regular contributor to the Kokomo *Tribune* and the Indianapolis *Saturday Herald.* Occasionally he sent verses to the Kokomo *Dispatch,* the Newcastle *Mercury,* the *Locomotive Fireman's Magazine* (Indianapolis) and the Peoria *Call,* while the Indianapolis *Journal* received a weekly budget. Less frequently, prose sketches or poems found their way to the Indianapolis *News* and the Cincinnati *Commercial.*

"The way to ascertain," said his friend Bill Nye, "is to find out." If newspapers were the channels for reaching the public, the sooner the medium was tested the better. So he began "going like an emery wheel, scintillating for five or six newspapers." Soon he showed signs of overwork. Friends became alarmed. Instead of flying to Mount Helicon, Pegasus was bearing him with all speed to the hospital. Maurice Thompson was certain "the physical frame of the Indiana Burns would soon wear out" and so wrote to the New York *Independent.* Another friend feared the poet would "attenuate into a set of quivering nerves and a pair of big, wild, hungry-looking eyes. Remember," this friend went on, "that thirty is a critical age for men of genius, and if you can get past that with a sound mind and a fair digestion you are as good as elected for the pantheon."

Here, when Riley was nearing thirty, was an ingathering of prophets whose forebodings, like the prophecies of others in years to follow, never came true. His friends had many kindly misgivings as to his powers of physical endurance, but with rare exceptions, they failed to take into account his powers of recuperation, which truly were astounding. While the doleful comments were being proclaimed from the housetops, Riley would, quite likely, be sitting up serenely in bed writing a poem. A day or so later he would surprise the community by walking down the street as if nothing serious had happened—as in reality it had not. "He must have been born to be hung," was about all there was left for his friends to say.

The newspapers of that day did not pay for poetic contributions, which mattered not particularly to the poet, except that he must have food, clothing and shelter. One editor, after publishing Riley's poems for a year, took his contributor to a tailor and ordered him a suit. "I had been wearing a coat of many colors and wrinkles," said Riley, "a vest with fringed pockets, shiny trousers, a seedy hat, and a fancy pair of shoes picked up from an old box marked 'Out of Style.' When, a few days after my good fortune, I walked down the street in a swell cashmere suit, my native haunts sat up and took notice. There was much speculation as to how I came in to such rare possession. I had never been accused of theft, but there was ground for suspicion."

The editor of the Peoria *Call*, like many other people, had been watching the poet's career with interest and predicting for him great success. The *Call* was young and, while it could not pay *poets*, it could afford

to pay two dollars a column for *prose* contributions. Riley's characteristic reply was as follows:

Greenfield, Indiana, August 27, 1879.

Dear Friend:

Right now I am going down among my juiciest MSS. and copy for the *Call,* the very ripest, lushest and mellowest old sonnet of the lot, and if you like sonnets as I like them, why, you will suck the one I send you like a pawpaw.

I appreciate your kindly offer of remuneration for contributions and feel honored that you really desire my work. I know a little something of newspapers. I would ask nothing for my work—only I'm absolutely compelled to—because I am poorer than any newspaper. But I am a smiler, and can hook the corners of my mouth as far back over my ears as any little man you ever saw. Tickles me when you say you "have a great curiosity to know something about me personally," and I infer from this remark, that you have not seen a recent "Interview" in the Chicago *Tribune.* That will tell you all about me—and I shudder as I call your attention to the fact.

Truly and gratefully yours,

J. W. RILEY.

Many poems contributed to the Kokomo *Tribune* became popular immediately: "A Bride," "Romancin'," "The Beetle," "The Passing of a Heart," "My Henry," "Tom Johnson's Quit," and "A Lost Love"; the last appearing in October, 1880, with its glimpse of married misery, which Sam Jones said sounded "like the wail of a defeated political party":

"He sailed not over the stormy sea,
And he went not down in the waves—not he—
But O he is lost—for he married me—
Good-by, my lover, good-by."

Many declared "Romancin' " the finest dialect poem extant. Hundreds went about their daily work repeating "The Beetle's" refrain:

"O'er garden blooms
On tides of musk,
The beetle booms adown the glooms
And bumps along the dusk."

"Here comes the Tribune," wrote the poet's friend, Dan Paine of the Indianapolis *News*, in August, 1879. "That infernal Beetle has been booming and bumping about my ears all day. The poem is just crammed with subtle beauties. Do you know there is as much imagery and poetry in the work you have turned out this week as would suffice many a man, who breaks into the magazines at a round price, for half a year. And you are doing it for nothing." Others expressed similar opinions. "Why waste genius on weekly papers?"

But Myron Reed's comment was different. It was not a waste of either time or genius; it was wise to remain a while longer among the country people. Riley found it easy to abide by his friend's counsel. Reed was ten years his senior. "Burns," Reed continued, "did not catch the characteristics and manners of the people living in Edinburgh until Providence had provided him with the knowledge of people living in the country. He held his ear close to the ground, and thus gained a more intimate knowledge of himself. To know himself was his constant study. He weighed himself alone; he balanced himself with others; he watched every means of information to see how much ground he occupied as a man—and as a poet. No,

you are not wasting your time. The waste of time comes when we go to gratify our desires with the vanities of the city."

In his latter days Reed insisted that "Riley was not always joking when he said he could write five poems a day. Then his poems were conceived and written in the fiery ecstasy of the imagination. The tonic of the spring was in them—and in *him*. His poems were trees, green and flourishing, quite different from the withered, sapless ones the older poets were polishing for the magazines."

Indiana slowly awoke to the realization that in Riley she had found an interpreter, and one can pardon her enthusiasm, and her humor, too, in spreading the fame of her favorite singer beyond her own borders. "If you keep on the way you are now going," wrote a local Mæcenas, "in three years you will be known all over Indiana, Illinois and parts of Missouri."

"You are copied in exchanges," another wrote, "from Connecticut to Colorado. To you more than any one else the Kokomo *Tribune* owes its literary reputation." "Don't you know," wrote Mary Hartwell Catherwood, "that you are spreading out more rapidly than any other young writer in the United States?" "You are going hand in hand with General Grant in an advertising wagon over the country," wrote another correspondent. "Your poem, 'My Henry,' will travel from Maine to the Golden Gate. I saw it last week in the New York *Tribune*."

Now and then there was a voice on the other side, enough to make things interesting. A protest came from Maurice Thompson. Dialect was not a happy medium for the transmission of song. "I shall be

sorry," he wrote, "if Riley depends on his *Tribune* stuff for his name and fame."

As interest in Riley grew, friends urged him to come out in book form. Burns had published his first book by the time *he* was thirty, and it had been so well received that new prospects had been opened to his poetic ambition. He had posted away to the city and had come under the patronage of one of the noblest men in Edinburgh.

A tiny cloud rose above the horizon, according to Riley, in the summer of 1879, but it soon vanished. "Mr. J. W. Riley," ran a weekly local, "the well-known poet and writer, and Mrs. Mary Hartwell Catherwood are engaged upon a joint literary production, which will appear in book form." "The idea," said Riley, "was this: An obscure genius grows up in the jungles of Hoosierdom, a poet—a real poet, unhonored and unsung. By the merest chance he discovers a young woman in the East who writes verses not unlike his own. One of her poems particularly attracts him, and in a gust of admiration he writes a letter of honest congratulation, to which she gracefully replies. Again he writes asking for other specimens of her work. Thus begins a correspondence. Their letters are reproduced, together with their poems and sketches. Each is inspired by the other and each is eager to excel. The inevitable follows, the young Hoosier vanishes mysteriously, and in due time brings home a bride from Boston—and all goes merry as a marriage bell. Mrs. Catherwood," Riley added, "was to write under the assumed name of Christine Braidly, and I was to answer as Thomas Whittleford. The book, which was to contain the poems as well as the corre-

spondence, was to be entitled *The Whittleford Letters*, and we even went so far as to see it (in our minds) published to the tune of twenty thousand."

"It was a fine air castle," said Mrs. Catherwood, "but neither Miss Braidly nor Mr. Whittleford could put the foundation under it. Both set up a high standard of writing. There was to be no rank overgrowth of words—just the plain stalk of truth springing up and blooming in its own purity. But quite soon the letters grew 'gushy.' Miss Braidly made the mistake of asking a poet to write poems to order. She might as well have asked him to extract sunbeams from seaweed. She had her eccentricities too. She had mischief and daring in her, and her Creator knew it. At times she was tempestuous as the sea. Team-work with such a combination was impossible. It would not have been more 'lunatic' had some swain hitched a zebu and a bighorn to a chaise in the hope of reaching London."

With the bursting of the Whittleford bubble, Riley became tranquil, and not for four years did he talk seriously of attempting book publication. "Don't rush into print," said Reed; "rush around here in Central Indiana towns a little while longer. Bide your time."

In March, 1879, Riley joined the *Tribune's* Home Department, making through the year numerous prose contributions. He also wrote "things in lighter vein." A little chaff among the wheat was his recipe for a good home paper. Some critics thought his *poems* met the requirements in that regard, but at any rate he became the "*Tribune* humorist."

The *Tribune* believed that a newspaper might and should become as profitable and as acceptable a medium

for authors as the magazines. "The state which builds up a literature of its own," it said editorially, "raises the most enduring monument in the world." Cherishing such views, exchanges in due time regarded the *Tribune* as "one of the best home journals in the West." By the end of 1879 it had a host of sixty contributors, about all the writers then residing in Indiana. At the head of the list was the mysterious "John C. Walker." Most of the Riley poems, afterward currently known as the Walker poems, were contributed and printed over that *nom de plume*. Naturally speculation was rife as to who was their author. Other contributors were as truly in the dark about it as were the readers. The Peoria *Call* gave the *Tribune* credit for "introducing the new dialect poet, John C. Walker, to the literary world."

"On a single page of my scrapbook," wrote D. S. Alexander, afterward congressman from Buffalo, New York, "Riley runs the gamut of feeling. I clipped his sonnet, 'Babyhood,' from the Boston *Advertiser*. A dozen lines on 'Sleep' were thought good enough for the New York *Evening Post*. His poem, 'The Shower,' strayed away up into Canada. Without name or credit they were traveling like gold pieces on their intrinsic worth, as valuable in New England as in Indiana. Turning a leaf I find dialect poems attributed to John C. Walker. How clean they are—not an oath or semblance of vulgar witticism in one of them. Riley has not owned these 'Walker poems,' but if he did not write them—*there's no use guessing.*"

On receiving the famous letter from Longfellow, Riley, overjoyed, promptly wrote his friend, Ben Parker of the Newcastle *Mercury*. In the same month

(November, 1876), the *Mercury* printed three Riley sonnets, "Dawn," "Dusk" and "Night," then entitled "Morning," "Evening" and "Night." In December, "If I Knew What Poets Know" appeared in the *Mercury* columns. "Our only excuse," said Parker, "for taking such liberty with an effusion sent only for the private inspection of the editor, is that it is so lovely we can not resist the temptation to print it."

In June of that Centennial Year, the *Mercury* printed part of "The Silent Victors," which Riley had written in May, to be read at Newcastle Decoration Day. "Riley taught us," said Parker, recalling the Memorial poem, "to see our dead in the flowers that burst from the ground. In 1861 we saw, with tear-dimmed eyes, our young men march away. In 1876 the poet came to twine wreaths upon the stones that stood like sentinels at their graves. All suddenly came the vision—

'While in the violet that greets the sun,
We see perchance, the eye whose light has flown;
And in the blushing rose, the cheek of one
That used to touch our own.'

Here was something new, a revelation to weeping mothers and sweethearts, a holy silence around, that they had not experienced before."

Henceforth from 1876 the *Mercury* was ever a Riley champion. Sometimes it criticized, but always for his good. It gave free circulation to the "Walker poems" and heartily enjoyed its discovery that Riley was their author.

Riley's contributions to the Indianapolis *Saturday Herald* covered the same period as those to the Kokomo

Tribune, the last, in February, 1880, being a dainty little valentine:

"With a bunch of baby-roses in a vase of filigree,
And hovering above them—just as cute as he could be—
Was a fairy Cupid tangled in a scarf of poetry."

Since the poet's contributions to the *Herald* were said by eminent critics to be his best work, it seemed an auspicious beginning that among his first should be "An Autumnal Extravaganza," another invocation to the Muse. The Muse dazzled his mind. She was an Autumn maiden filling his heart with a passion so intense, earthly eloquence failed to describe her. He wanted to kneel at her feet and worship her. "Let the winds," he implored,

"Blow aside the hazy veil
From the daylight of your face;
Let me see the things you see
Down the depths of Mystery!"

"Riley's poetic fire," said George C. Harding, editor of the *Herald*, "had been smoldering under a cargo of depression, just flickering, gasping for fuel. When at last the Muse began to twang the lyre, he was electric. As he himself said, the flames leaped up roaringly and illumined the heart like a torchlight procession."

Appearing in the *Herald* were such popular poems as "The Tree-Toad," "Tom Van Arden," "Dan Paine," "God Bless Us Every One," "Babyhood," "A Sleeping Beauty," "A Dream of Autumn," "Old-Fashioned Roses," "The Little Town o' Tailholt" and "Moon-Drowned," always lovingly enshrined in its author's

heart. Like the poems for the Kokomo *Tribune*, these soon began a vagabond existence, finding temporary resting places in the corners of the world's exchanges.

There was one, however, that the exchanges did not relish, Riley's first long poem, "The Flying Islands of the Night." Warmly approved by many and as savagely criticized by others, its reception had a parallel in that given Keats' "Endymion." In writing it, Riley, like Keats, had plunged headlong into the sea regardless of shoals and quicksands; and, like Keats again, Riley was greatly disappointed that it was so unfavorably received, although he was not so broken in spirit.

"In 'The Flying Islands,'" said Riley, "I attempted to write a drama out of nothing to stand on and no place to stand. The ambrosia that nourished my fancy came from undiscovered regions in dim oceans of space. The poem more nearly approaches a creation than anything I have done—but I am not here to explain it nor to tell how I wrote it. That is a mystery to me as it is to others."

At a later period, writing Mr. Joseph Knight of England, Riley said that there was nothing left "but to confess the work as simply and entirely a fabrication of fancy—purposely and defiantly avoiding, if possible, any reference to any former venture or accomplishment of any writer, dead or living—though in this acknowledgment I hasten to assure you that no spirit of irreverence as I wrote was either in possession of or parcel of my thought. It was all bred of an innocent desire to do a *new* thing. I argued simply in this wise: Some mind, sometime, invented fairies, and their realm. So with mermaids and their king-

dom—and so I went on with the illimitable list till I found

> 'The earth and the air and the sea,
> And the infinite spaces'

all—all occupied. So, obviously, I had in my crying dilemma, to put up with flying islands, together with such inhabitants thereon, as I might hope to suggest if not create."

The drama was the fourth in a series of six prose sketches interspersed with poems, entitled "The Respectfully Declined Papers of the Buzz Club," printed anonymously in the spring and summer of 1878, and copyrighted in October—not with the design of then making a book, but simply to protect the author's claims.

Like the "Flying Islands," the "Buzz Club" was constructed out of nothing. It was purely a Riley creation. The object of its meetings was "to listen and learn and to join in a hullabaloo of delight." Its roster had a list of twenty-five members, but when the roll was called only four responded—"four literary enthusiasts living in the town of Greenfield, Hancock County." What they said at the Club meetings and the papers they read were duly reported and printed in the *Saturday Herald.*

There was a Mr. Hunchley, the president of the Club, and a Mr. Plempton, whose contributions showed a faint contempt for his co-workers. And Mr. Clickwad, "the fantastic figure of the group," as Riley wrote, "an enduring surprise, an eternal enigma—erratic, abrupt, eruptive, and interruptive; a combatant of known rules and models, a grotesque defier

of all critical opinion, whose startling imagination was seemingly at times beyond his control even had he cared to bridle it."

Mr. Clickwad manifested Riley characteristics at all the meetings, as did also the fourth member of the Club, Mr. Bryce, "a sad-faced, seedy gentleman, of a slender architecture, and a restless air indicative of a highly sensitive temperament. He wore no badge of age save that his beardless face was freaked about the corners of his eyes, nose and mouth with wrinkles. His dress, although much worn and sadly lacking in length of leg and sleeve, still held a certain elegance that retained respect."

He was introduced to the Club at its second meeting as follows: "Gentlemen," said the president with a radiant smile, "I have the honor of introducing to your notice a gentleman whose intrinsic talents the world is yet to hear from, when the plaudits of a nation shall infest the atmosphere. A genius and an artist all combined in a music box of nature and a masterwork of mind. A dawning star whose brilliance shall permeate the gloom of—of—histrionic history—and—and—but why continue in a vein of prophetic possibilities? Gentlemen, as I said before, I present to your notice and esteem the rising young actor and character-artist, Mr. J. Burt Bryce."

It was said the young actor's eyelashes drooped demurely at the warm welcome. "Highly complimentary," remarked Riley years after. "The illustrious actor, your little bench-leg favorite, went to bed that night with his boots on, and his head swelling like a puff fish."

When Riley admitted that he was the author of the

"Flying Islands," friends "shed luster on his name" by dubbing him "Mr. Bryce of the Buzz Club," or if the duality of his genius was in mind, "Bryce and Clickwad."

Editors were at sixes and sevens about Mr. Clickwad. "Who," asked one, "writes the 'Buzz Club Papers'? They remind one of the *Pickwick Papers*, but poor Dickens is beyond accusation. The poetry is excellent, some of it scarcely surpassable for freshness and sweetness. Our own J. W. Riley will have to groom his Pegasus with critical care, or he will fetch up a length behind. We can understand how a man can excel in a specialty—how a poet may reach dizzy altitude in a particular field, but the capacity to startle and please in *any* part of the poetic realm—that indeed occasions surprise."

At one of the Club meetings, Mr. Clickwad having prepared a little volume to read on the occasion, the members were asked to "accept it in its virgin form, bare, bald, and stark of either index, notes or glossary." Clearing his throat vehemently and turning abruptly to his manuscript, he read "The Flying Islands of the Night." Was there really a poet by the name of Clickwad, *Herald* readers were asking, and if so, where did he live, and what was his history? The public did not know.

When the popular poem, "Her Beautiful Hands," appeared in the "Club Papers," friends were certain Riley was its author. Still he was disinclined to burst the bubble. He allowed the report to be circulated that the "Buzz Club" author had most grievously purloined one of the Hoosier Poet's priceless effusions. Even after it was known that Mr. Clickwad was a

fiction, Riley added to the bewilderment by attacking his own productions. An instance was an unsigned editorial in the *Herald*. " 'The Flying Islands of the Night,' " he said, "has thrown many of the small rhymers into a chasm of misery. They writhe and wail and gnash their teeth in dismay. Some are determined they will not lie supinely while J. W. Riley, the poet, rides triumphantly over them with his imposing train of Wunks, Spirks, Crools and Wamboos. Instead of admiring the originality of conception and the fantastic fancy its author displays in the poem, they condemn it because it is quite unlike anything they have ever read. Not one of the critics appears to remember that the work is given to the public through the medium of Mr. Clickwad, an individual of peculiar personality and eccentric mind and manners, exactly the character to give off mental emanations of original flavor."

Among those whom Riley perplexed by his secrecy and evasion was Mr. Enos B. Reed, the editor of the Indianapolis *People*, who for some time had been setting his seal of disapproval on about everything the poet wrote. The *People* was seldom happier than when holding Riley up to ridicule. While Riley was unfavorably criticizing the "Flying Islands," the editor of the *People* was praising it; for one reason, at least, because Riley was against it. It contained "some of the sweetest gems that ever sparkled from a soul on fire." When, however, the editor discovered that Riley was its author, the poem was branded "an ignominious failure."

This was a situation that filled Riley and his Greenfield associates with uncontrollable mirth. "We hid

away in back lots," said one, "and cackled like a flock of buff cochins."

Comment on the "Flying Islands" was about equally divided—favorable and unfavorable. "It is now pretty generally known," said the Indianapolis *Herald* (August, 1878), "that Mr. J. W. Riley is the author of the 'Buzz Club Papers.' Such remarkable versatility, such captivating originality, and such exquisite tenderness as he has shown in the construction of his poems are seldom found in any author. The 'Flying Islands' will forever fly, a strange vision of beauty, in the minds of those who read them."

At first Riley was startled and chagrined at the criticism of his long-time friend, B. S. Parker of Newcastle. Later he read and reread it, "chewed, swallowed and digested it," he said. " 'The Flying Islands of the Night,' " wrote Parker in the *Mercury*. "What is it? Well, we don't know. It is a waif of nothing on a warp of nought. It is a drama in which beings appear that never existed anywhere except in Riley's brain, and they inhabit countries the very names of which are foreign to anything else on the earth except Riley's fancy. They are not fairies such as used to inhabit earth and hold high carnival in the corollas of wood flowers, but they are new creations. The poem is full of pretty pictures, but no practical soul can ever guess what they mean.—

'When kings are kings, and kings are men—
And the lonesome rain is raining—
O who shall rule from the red throne then,
And who shall wield the scepter when—
When the winds are all complaining?'

Beautiful, is it not? But what does it mean? Well, what does Poe's 'Ulalume' mean? It means the same that this does, an expression of the beautiful in melody and rhythm, that is so exquisite of itself it constitutes a living excellence. But Mr. Riley wants to call a halt in that direction now. One or two successes in nonsense rhyme is all that any man can achieve. The public is patient, but practical, and too much of that sort of thing puts it out of humor, and once out of humor it is hard to woo back."

After warring in vain with the critics, Riley began to sigh for peace. "Enough of this pelting and pommeling," he wrote his old Schoolmaster friend. "I am tired of flying. Give me a parachute. I want to make a landing. Shelter me in some sleeping wilderness, so far from the rustle of a newspaper and the strife of tongues that the moan of a dove will swoon on the silence."

Such seclusion being unavailable, Riley called at the *Saturday Herald* office. Myron Reed had been in a few days before and expressed himself forcibly. "I am glad to hear," said Reed (as recorded by the editor), "that Riley has called for a parachute. I do not say that he should not write another 'Flying Islands.' I agree with others that the poem is musical. I rejoice that its author sees love in the eyes of a Wunkland princess. We may speculate about what life in the stars is like, and Riley in his astronomical drama, from the view-point of the stars, may set his characters to wondering what life on the earth is like —but it must not become habitual. Riley says he does not write of things above the clouds and under the

earth because he does not see and hear them. He should abide by his own preaching. That sort of poetry is written to order by a clique of literary primroses. It is not a picture drawn from life or taken on the spot. What would you think of a newspaper man shutting himself up in a room to write the news of the day? He could give you a series of words grammatically arranged, but it would not be news. The best newspaper men tell truthfully what they have seen and heard, and so do the best poets. Skyrocketing is for the few. The multitude require manna, such poems as 'The Lost Path,' 'A Mother-Song' and 'My Bride That Is to Be.' The poet who writes things like these hears the trudge of humanity. Riley can not afford to put things together by the wrong end. He will not reach the people by flying away in a high wind, on a broomstick. The ocean we call the earth over which we *have* to sail is wide enough—and there will be fogs enough before we reach port."

What Reed said was duly detailed to Riley and, according to the editor, it was digested and assimilated. Afterward the poet occasionally enveloped a short poem with mystery—but never again an astronomical drama.

CHAPTER III

THE FORTUNE OF FRIENDSHIP

RILEY was suspicious of friends when he should have been trustful. The seeds of distrust were sown early. When a lad in Greenfield he was lured from town by a boy who assured him there were trees in the woods that dripped honey as the maples dripped sugar-water. When they reached the center of a huge poplar grove on Little Brandywine the boy turned suddenly and said: "It is a lie—there ain't no such trees." With that the boy ran away, laughing, leaving young Riley to find his way out of the woods as best he could. "I was a turtle," said Riley; "the bad boy turned me over on my back and left me. I cried all the way home, not because I was lost, but because I had been deceived."

The love of a friend, "the shining of a face upon a face"—no substitute for that. It is a poem with soul in it. Heaven admonished the poet to live that poem, but he did not always do it. On the contrary, he frequently exercised his "incapacity for lovely association." "It is in my flesh," he often repeated, "the sin that dwelleth in me; the good which I *would* do I do not, and the evil which I would *not* do I do,"—and then came the hours of lonely remorse.

The poet was ever ready to ratify treaties of friendship, but after they were ratified he wanted, sometimes, to maintain them on about the same terms

that David Copperfield's mother maintained friendly relations with Peggotty: *You are my true friend, Peggotty, I know, if I have any in this world. When I call you a ridiculous creature, or a vexatious thing, or anything of that sort, I only mean that you are my true friend.* So it was that the poet lost a friend, now and again, through no fault of the friend. An instance of his plain speaking and the remorse following it is pathetically disclosed in an early letter to Charles Philips of Kokomo:

The Morgue, Midnight, August 15, 1879.

Dear Charles:

I wrote you last evening, requesting especially, that you should answer me to-night, and looked certainly for a reply—for you have never failed me. But there was none. I can not tell you the depth of my disappointment and anxiety—for all evening I have gone about with a strange feeling of heaviness, and at last it has grown intolerable and I have just risen from my sleepless bed to write you this. In my letter of last evening I fear I unintentionally wounded you, and that you are "striking back" with silence. I wrote hurriedly, I know, but it was with the very warmest feeling of brotherly regard. What I said, I distinctly said for the effect of *force* more than elegance, but it was not meant to hurt—neither was it as I thought an undue license in one as warmly interested in you as your own true character compels me to be. When I like any one, perhaps it is my fault to enter too deeply into their personal affairs, or, in other words—am inclined to meddle with matters that do not concern me. If I have done this with you, I earnestly ask you to regard it as an insane burst of affection, for at worst it is that. I don't think you understand my real nature. I have thought different at times, but as I write, I fear with a regret there is no name for, that

like the grand majority, you misjudge me. I do not blame you if you do, only it hurts, my dear friend, just to wade on through existence as I do with not one soul of all the world's wide millions that will see me as I am. I try very hard to laugh down this idea of mine that I am being eternally misinterpreted, but every fresh experience only seems more firmly to fix and rivet the truth of it within me. When I tell my friend I love him, I love him. There is no play in the grooves of my affection. And when a friend slides in my heart he fits there and the bony hand of Death can not jostle him. Maybe I do you wrong to doubt the strength of your regard, but I want such giant strengths of friendship that sometimes I think my own will never be matched here—that it is more than I could ask or expect. In any instance I am what I am. God made me so, and if I do not pass for my full value here, Heaven will be brighter comprehending it.

To-morrow I go down to Indianapolis. I may not hope to see you then as I desired; but wherever you are through life and death feel always that my love is with you.

J. W. RILEY.

Not being a poet, Philips could not in entirety understand a poet. Soon, however, the two men were reconciled, and years later, after the editor's death, the poet was proud to say at a banquet that he had been "the guest of one of the loveliest men he had ever known, the bright young editor of the Kokomo *Tribune*."

As shown by the letter to the editor, Riley's attitude toward friendship was one of extremes. He was either on the housetop *with* them or in the basement *without* them. There was no middle ground; they must be at the extremity of the fraternal scale, the upper extremity of course, and when they were not

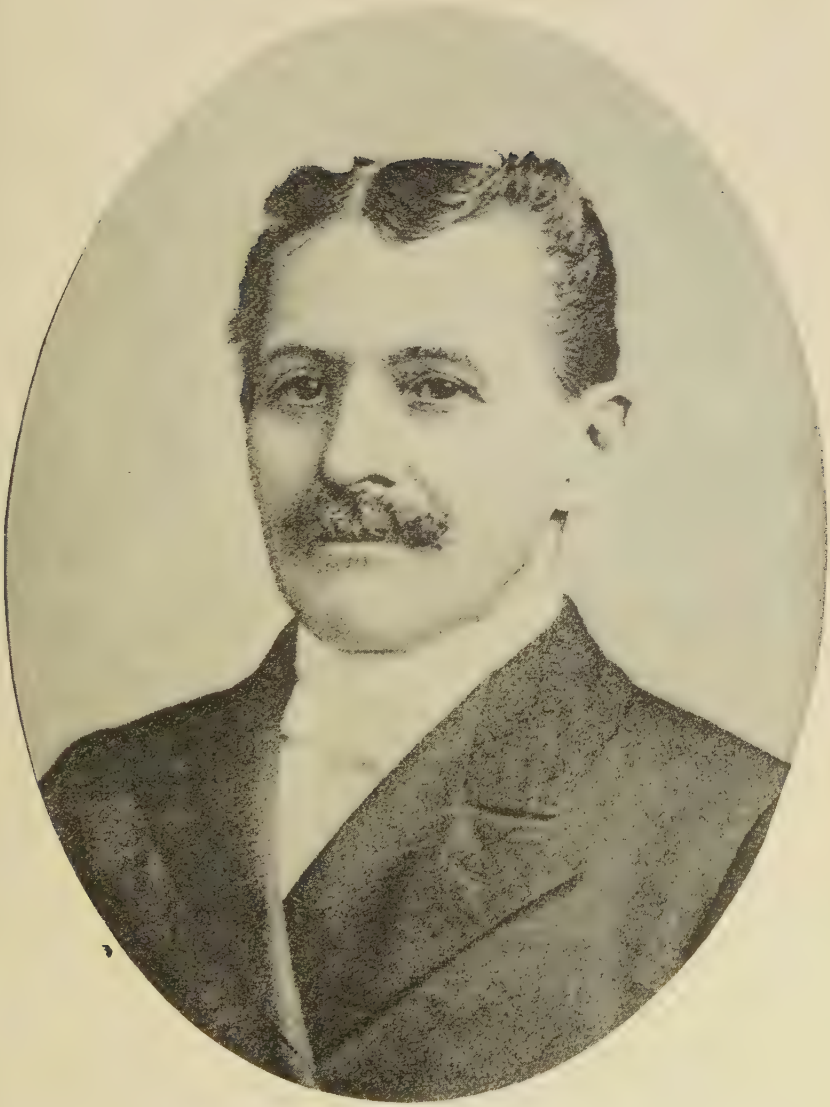
there they did not answer the requirements. If they were impatient with his feverish, often unintelligible moods, so much the worse for them.

Nevertheless, in those early, providential years, many friends gathered around the poet. There was a brotherly conspiracy to promote his welfare, a combined desire—first among a few editors and writers, and soon among the people—to enlist under the poet's banner. It is remarkable the host of unselfish admirers who, through a period of forty years, came forward with outstretched friendly hand.

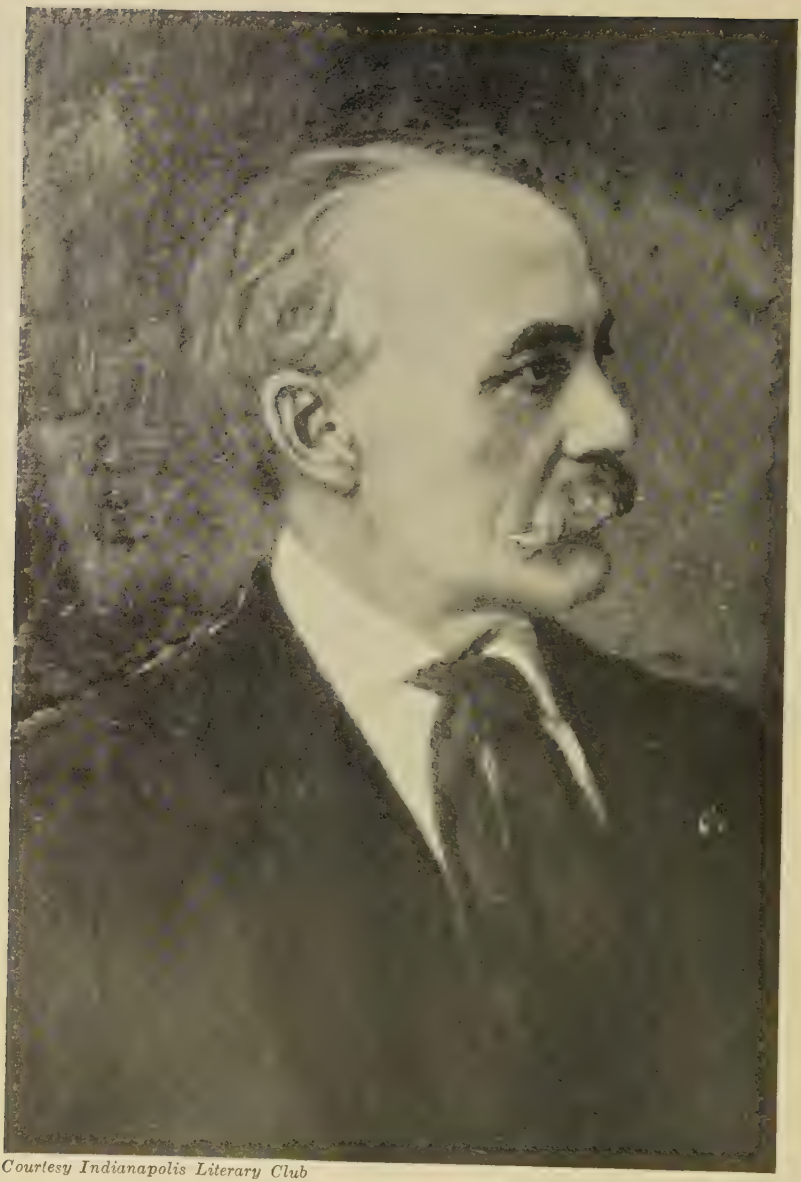
In that brotherly conspiracy were two friends who deserve from the reader more than a bowing acquaintance—two friends, who could not come too often nor stay too long—two men, according to Riley, whose influence during his maturing years was most potent —Robert Burdette and Myron Reed. Burdette was the poet's sponsor on the platform; Reed in literature.

"Longfellow discovered poetic insight in me," said Riley; "Reed also discovered it, but he did more; he helped to bring it out." Those who should know have said that, had it not been for Reed, the public never would have enjoyed the Riley poems—an exaggeration, of course, although Riley, ever grateful to his friend, said, "It is the truth."

"I pushed off from shore, through channels of chance and peril," Riley continued, "with such pilots as the Fates provided; but out there in the offing, beyond the sand bars, were two friends awaiting me whose faith in my future never wavered. They knew that human hopes have their roots in human needs; their love prevailed to the end." Late in life the poet recalled that they had often been true to him when he was untrue



Robert J. Burdette, who Introduced the Poet to the Lecture Platform



Courtesy Indianapolis Literary Club

MYRON W. REED

From a portrait by T. C. Steele

to himself. They did for him what time does for all homely history—they softened his asperities and beautified his inequalities with their love. "We loved Riley so zealously," said Burdette, "that we almost made his faults venerable—what time has done, in a way, for Robert Burns."

The two friends appeared on Riley's horizon before he was thirty, and were thus champions of his youth as well as of his maturity. He met one of them, after a long absence, and thus described the meeting:

"And there was something in his tone,
And in his look of love—
And there was something in my own,
The present knows not of:—
We stood forgetful of To-day;
And all its later store
Of love and wealth was swept away,
As we struck hands once more.

"To meet fulfillment of our dreams
Is very sweet; to know
The need of gold, and gain it, seems
A good for high and low;
And sweet is love without regret,
And lips that kiss and cling,
But youthful friendship faithful yet—
That is the sweetest thing."

Riley speculated considerably on the origin of friendships. Their coming into his life was like the birth of poems—a mystery. He could not account for affinities any more than he could for antipathies. Burdette had come down from a village in Pennsylvania, and Reed from the Green Mountains of Vermont. Who started and guided them to the Hoosier Poet's door? "Friends

are made by something that can not be planned," was Reed's word to the poet. "You never made a friend on purpose in your life. That a magnet will assemble steel filings was not settled by an act of Congress."

"Friends take possession of me, I suppose," returned Riley mischievously, "in about the same unexpected way that Peggotty was seized with fits of mental wandering. I am not permitted to pick out and choose my people. They come and they go, and they don't come and they don't go, just as they like."

And there was the same mystery about a letter. It was a dead mute sheet of white paper, and yet alive and quivering with human qualities and emotions. "We get a letter from a friend," Riley once wrote, "with page after page of limpid-flowing humor and discriminating observations, and we await his coming on the tiptoe of expectation. Nothing, we think, can be more deliciously stimulating than our meeting. The path to our door grows golden with sunshine, and we imagine that the grass will sparkle with dewdrops when he comes; but when we meet face to face we find him strangely uncommunicative and pathetically inconsequential—man or woman, the disappointment is the same—no warmth or impulse in anything he or she says—all the eloquence, spirit and enthusiasm of the letter just dead ashes dusted down the winds. Such tragic awakenings drive poets insane."

But never was there a visit from Reed or Burdette, expected or unexpected, that was a disappointment. Theirs was "the miracle of unbroken friendship."

At four o'clock, one icy December morning in 1879, Riley and Burdette met at Spencer, Indiana. It had been a dark night. Riley had driven across country,

through slush and freezing rain, from Bloomington, where he had given a reading the evening before. The same evening the "Hawkeye Man" had lectured in Spencer on "The Rise and Fall of the Mustache." When he came down from his room in the hotel, so he said afterward, he found Riley at a table before a roaring grate fire, writing poetry. "It is curious," said Riley, after striking a glad hand with his comrade, "how friends are made and where true fellowship begins. You and I have known each other all our lives and have never met before."

"True," returned Burdette; "I suppose we boys did make war on weeds, Colorado beetles, and cutworms down on the old plantation, but just at this moment I fail to remember that we ever climbed into a melon patch together. What kind of an audience did you have in Bloomington?"

"I succeeded in holding the janitor spellbound for an hour and a half," answered Riley. "I would have had two in my audience, but the town marshal slipped as he reached the top step and shot like a bullfrog down the stairway and across the street. Had it not been for the Court House fence, he would have slid half-way to Brown County. How did you fare in Spencer?"

"The committee and the editor braved the storm rather than have the hall closed on me," said Burdette. "'Ladies and Gentlemen,' I began, after introducing myself to the audience, 'Adam raised Cain, but he did not raise a mustache.' Just then it suddenly occurred to me to look out over the sea of empty benches. Behold! there was not a lady in the hall."

The two new-old friends came to Indianapolis on a

peep-o'-day train, "Riley to go on to speak his piece at Winchester, Indiana," said Burdette, "and I to go on to 'holler' at Xenia, Ohio." Truly it was for both the day of "small minorities" in Indiana. Twenty years went by before Burdette's fame and friends filled the largest auditorium in the Hoosier capital, when, in Riley's fervent language, "the glory of his victory danced and shimmered over the city like heat above a kitchen stove."

For a decade Burdette made it a point to come to Indianapolis to see Riley once a year. When in the city they were constantly together; neither knew what fatigue meant, nor when it was time to go to bed or to get up. It was a glorious round of sparkling pleasure. Burdette regarded Riley as the most effervescent fellow he ever saw. He was always asking the poet questions to keep him conversationally stirred up. Sometimes they would meet Myron Reed at the Indianapolis *Journal* office—and then "the streams would overflow their banks." "What a set of lovers we three are," remarked Riley once to Burdette. "Reed brags on you, and I brag on you, and we both brag on you; then he brags on me, and I brag on him, and we both brag on each other—till finally I just let all holds go and brag on myself."

Since 1874 Burdette had been editor of the Burlington *Hawkeye*, and it was in that capacity that Riley had learned to love him. Before their meeting at Spencer, the editor, without knowing it, had inspired "The Funny Little Fellow," the first poem Riley sent to a standard magazine. The poem's early date, December, 1876, seems to make good Riley's claim

that the two men were friends before they met. In January, 1880, Riley wrote as follows:

Dear Man:

Do not want to clog your time but I must hold you with my glittering pen long enough to thank you for your kindly mention of me in your Spencer letter. It was a good thing to say and a mighty good way you said it. But years ago I said a good thing about you. You never knew it perhaps, for it was when the soul of me had been out "high-lonesoming," and had run up against your own out there in Burlington. What I said started out like this:

'Twas a Funny Little Fellow
Of the very purest type,
For he had a heart as mellow
As an apple over-ripe,
And the brightest little twinkle
When a funny thing occurred,
And the lightest little tinkle
Of a laugh you ever heard.

You laughed away the sorrow and the gloom. I had mothers in the poem loving you and babies crowing for you, and ended what I wrote (just as it will some glorious time, I pray) like this:

And I think the Angels knew him,
And had gathered to await
His coming, and run to him
Through the widely opened Gate,
With their faces gleaming sunny
For his laughter-loving sake,
And thinking, "What a funny
Little Angel he will make!"

Yours always, with all hale affection,
J. W. RILEY.

In Burdette, Riley found a friend who never lost his youth. "I would not give a peppercorn for a man who suppresses his enthusiasm," said Burdette on one of his return trips to Indianapolis. "From the standpoint of enthusiasm, what was the chief event of our Centennial Year? It was not a Liberty handkerchief or the Philadelphia Exposition. It was that bedlam scene in our National Capitol, when Blaine, speaking on a question of personal privilege, vindicated himself on the floor of the House, when representatives wore themselves out with cheering, when the galleries became turbulent and the police helpless as babes in a flood. There were actors in that legislative body. Blaine was an actor.

"I believe in enthusiasm," Burdette continued; "I was in Michigan yesterday. I tried to make eyes take fire, and hearts beat a little faster up there at Rossville. I have traveled two hundred miles out of my way to have some fun. I want to break every parliamentary rule in *Cushing's Manual.* The world's a stage—all men are players. Blaine gave his *show* without call-boys or scene-shifters. So can we. Let us play."

And those play-fellows played. Writing a friend from Indianapolis about a few of the rollicking features of their play, Riley said: "Burdette stopped off here to see me, from eight in the evening until four in the morning—and what fun! I could never tell you half of it. The little man went mad—stark, staring mad—and so did I, in this old faded room of mine. We played circus; he was the master of the arena and rode chairs around the room and did contortion acts and feats of strength, and so forth. Then he insisted

upon being an elephant and made me his keeper and exhibitor; and I steered him into the ring despite his rumblings or expostulations, and reared him upon his fore legs firmly, and then planted him on his hind legs and spun him round and round one way and back the other. Then he whistled and 'went lame' in any leg at will; and then his intrepid keeper lay supinely down while the colossal monster walked over him. There were two local actors with us. You would have died, as they did, to see how ludicrously perfect was every motion, and the incredible awkwardness and care of the elephant as he slowly stepped down each foot, one at a time, in this most remarkable performance."

"Happy days they were," wrote Burdette in memory of them. "How they bubbled over with laughter. How many times I have turned out of my way, just to have a day and a night with Riley. I met him at the door of the Indianapolis *Journal* office one night. 'Where are you going?' he demanded. 'Nowhere,' I said. 'Anywhere. I've just come down from LaPorte to put in one camp-fire with you.' He said he had an assignment to report a 'wind fight,' but he would sublet it, which he did. (The 'wind fight' was an oratorical contest.) And we prowled about Indianapolis, and climbed up into newspaper offices, and invaded the rooms of fellows whom we knew, or loitered here and there by ourselves, under no pretext of hunting material, or making 'character studies,' or of doing anything else useful—merely filling the night with our talk, and the delight of being with each other."

Once Burdette was one of a group in a back corner of the *Journal* office, when Riley recited "The Object

Lesson." "That audience," said Burdette, "beat any *public* one that ever drew a watch on me or coaxed me into silence by their slumbers. There were brilliant men in it, among them a future president of the United States." Burdette was so certain after that that Riley could magnetize a public audience that he went home and wrote the following, which he sent abroad to lecture bureaus and committees, and had printed in many newspapers:

Office of "The Hawkeye," Burlington, Iowa.

It has been my pleasure to listen to Mr. J. W. Riley, and I never heard him say a tiresome word or utter a stupid sentence. I would walk through the mud or ride through the rain to hear him again. I would get out of bed to listen to him. If I have a friend on a lecture committee in the United States, I want to whisper in his ear that one of the best hits he can make will be to surprise his audience with J. W. Riley and his "Object Lesson." Riley is good clean through. His humor is gentle; it is not caustic. It is pure and manly, and the people that will once listen to him will want him back again the same season.

R. J. BURDETTE.

Riley always recalled this generous act of his friend with thanksgiving. "I owe a debt to Burdette," he said, "which I can never repay. He was my first sponsor in the lecture field. He took me up and put me before the public and the lyceum bureaus. It was through him that I won hearty rounds of applause when I appeared in lecture courses for the first time."

Robert Jones Burdette! Always the night was jeweled with light when Riley could think of this man.

There were chums, comrades, associates, well-

wishers, and play-fellows in the Riley gallery of friendship, but the Aristides was Myron Winslow Reed, who at that time occupied the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church at Indianapolis. A man of eccentricities, but a big man, with a great heart and a great brain. He hated cant, and all hypocrisies, was a religious liberal, a fighter and something of a rebel. He read every good thing he could get his hands on, preached brilliantly, talked little and seldom was known to make a parish call.

Their first meeting was at the Memorial Day exercises, Crown Hill Cemetery, Indianapolis, 1878—a gathering of three thousand people, where Reed offered prayer and Riley read "The Silent Victors." "Had that prayer been reported," said General John Coburn, who was the orator of the day, "it would have been immortal as was the poem." Riley was certain about the immortality in the prayer, but uncertain about it in the poem. "Reed's prayer," said he, "was the prayer of experience. He was a graduate of the Civil War. He had wept over dying men. He had seen,

> 'On battlefields, the scarlet dew
> That drips from patriot veins.' "

"We met at Crown Hill," said Reed, "but I had known Riley before. I live a great deal with friends I have never seen. You can love a woman—you can love a man—whom you have never met, to whom you have not written a letter, or sent a telegram. I did not have to meet Riley to know him. Did I not know that the harp he plays upon is the sweetest one in the world? Had I not mooned over his 'August,' and seen the gleaming face of Day sink into the slumbering

arms of Night? Had I not beheld the reflex of a man of genius in his 'Fame'? Had I not heard the good expressed above the wrong in 'John Walsh'? Had I not recoiled from the dregs of a ruined reputation in his 'Dead Selves'? Did I not know that we are not always glad when we smile? Why should I look at the poet's features? The music in his heart harmonized with that in my own."

An odd feature of their friendship was the absence of letters. Riley explained that they used the "telepathic method." The Denver papers containing Reed's weekly sermons, and postal cards, were sufficient, after the preacher moved to Colorado—tokens of love eternal: "As always your vast debtor and grateful, faithful and enduring for all ages and for all worlds, James Whitcomb Riley."

"I suppose," said Riley, "that I have lured Reed through the side door of the Indianapolis *Journal* office a hundred times, saying to myself when we were seated alone, 'Now he will tell me his life-story.' He never did." Combining fragments of his history, then and after, Riley came to know that Reed had gone hungry and without a bed. Sitting on a bench in New York's Madison Square, he had eaten his last lunch and thrown the crumbs to sparrows. Moneyless and weary, he had gone aboard a fishing smack and sailed for Newfoundland. "Nothing more dreary than cleaning cod and halibut by day and blowing a fog horn by night." Returning, he had mowed marsh grass on the Hudson, distributed campaign documents for Horace Greeley, taught school in the Catskills, and gone west to "the precarious existence of a country editor in Wisconsin." He had been a preacher in

Milwaukee, New Orleans, Indianapolis and Denver. He had felt the sharp edge of misfortune, and the blows of circumstance had strengthened and tempered him. "He did not blow a whistle," said Riley, "to tell you he was going to stop. He quit. Once in our city he stood before a great audience, tall, grim, commanding, and said: 'It is enough to say that Wendell Phillips is the speaker and Charles Sumner the subject.' When he made a speech his thoughts went straight home like carrier pigeons. He was no more an orator in one sense than is a man who reads the newspaper to his family. In another—the Emersonian sense—there was no better orator in the West. And there was no better friend—old, young; high, humble; rich, poor; educated, ignorant; wise, foolish—all without distinction came within the folds of his friendship."

Such in brief is the man who discovered the Hoosier Poet, "that is," said Reed, "I discovered him as Columbus discovered America—a great many people had discovered him before I did."

Riley always and fondly acknowledged his debt and affirmed on various occasions that Reed turned him squarely around and made him face the right way. To Reed's influence and inspiration we to-day are beholden for such poems as "The Prayer Perfect," "The Song I Never Sing," "To Robert Burns," "Let Something Good Be Said," and the tender lines, "Reach Your Hand to Me"—

> "Groping somewhere in the night,
> Just a touch, however light,
> Will make all the darkness bright.
> Sometime there will come an end—
> Reach your hand to me, my friend."

CHAPTER IV

WITH THE INDIANAPOLIS JOURNAL

EARLY in September, 1876, Riley's friend and schoolmate, Hamilton J. Dunbar, died in "the gleaming dawn of name and fame," as the poet put it. Dunbar was a brilliant young attorney, a man of really great influence and an orator who had attracted the favorable consideration of such famous statesmen as Richard W. Thompson and Daniel W. Voorhees.

Among the many tributes paid to young Dunbar's memory was Riley's poem, "Dead in Sight of Fame," which he read at the meeting of the Greenfield bar. The poem attracted the attention of visiting attorneys, among them Judge E. B. Martindale, proprietor of the Indianapolis *Journal.*

"My meeting the Judge on the memorial occasion," said Riley, "was another day of fortunate beginnings." And it was, for in the following February the *Journal* printed "The Remarkable Man," a sketch, with the poem, "In the Dark." " 'The Remarkable Man,' " said the *Journal,* editorially, "is a rather remarkable composition." This appreciative notice brimmed Riley with delight. "I was as tickled over it," he said, "as a boy on the Fourth of July, when he hears the bang of the first gun."

A week or so later Judge Martindale sent by a friend an invitation for Riley to call at the office. Not receiv-

ing the call as soon as he expected, he wrote the poet as follows:

THE JOURNAL

Indianapolis, February 27, 1877.

Jas. W. Riley,
Greenfield, Ind.
My dear Sir:

I want to thank you for the article and poem sent the *Journal*. I am sure you have a future and will help with the *Journal* to make it whatever your application and industry deserves. I hope you will call on me when you are in the city. I may be able to make some suggestions and afford you encouragement. I like to help young men who help themselves.

Truly yours,
E. B. MARTINDALE.

The letter contained a check for ten dollars, which the poet's admiring friends thought trivial for a contribution that was "making the *Journal* popular," but Riley held a different opinion:

Greenfield, Indiana, February 28, 1877.

E. B. Martindale—Editor:

The good letter you gave me yesterday is like the warm grasp of a friend. I can not tell you what a deep sense of pleasure I experience at the honesty of every utterance, nor can I express the great strength of my gratitude.

Since "each word of kindness, come whence it may, is welcome to the poor," I count myself most highly honored by the interest you manifest.

I thank you for the invitation you extend me, and will assuredly call upon you when in your city.

Very gratefully yours,
J. W. RILEY.

Riley was flattered by the praise of his prose that came from many quarters, but what he wanted most of all was that the *Journal* should become the medium for the circulation of his poems. It was the first daily to show a cordial interest in his future. It would carry his name to remote corners of the state. So he chose a poem from his slender stock and sent it to the Indianapolis paper. It was promptly accepted and printed. That poem, illustrated and made into a book by Riley's publishers, has sold in quantities that challenge the imagination, earning a fortune in royalties and fixing the poet's name in the minds and hearts of countless readers. It was "An Old Sweetheart of Mine."

Indianapolis, March 9, 1877.

James W. Riley, Esq.
My dear Sir:

I have just read the beautiful poem you sent the *Journal* to-day and take this opportunity to compliment you upon it. I must say I think it is equal to anything I have read for years. I will take in the future any prose or poetry you may write and will compensate you for what you furnish. Have also directed the Daily and Weekly sent you.

Truly your friend,
E. B. MARTINDALE.

Not since his "hurricane of delight" over the Longfellow letter had Riley been in such a flutter as he was over this cordial word from the *Journal.* He "felt," to use his own words, "that ultimately he would be employed on the *Journal,*" but then, in 1877, he "was not big enough for so big an opportunity." For the present it was sweet to know others loved his "Old

Sweetheart"—sweet to see the curtain lifted, sweet to anticipate success, and he so expressed himself in his reply to the Judge's letter.

The friendly relation thus established, although he was not regularly employed on the paper until two years later, covered a period of twenty years. He was soon known as the *"Journal's Poet,"* and justly so, for at least half of all his printed productions appeared in its columns, possibly more than half of all the poet wrote in his most prolific years—from January, 1877, to the publication of his *Old-Fashioned Roses*, 1888. He wrote anonymously or over a pen name while winning distinction on the weekly papers. When writing for the *Journal* he signed his own name, with few exceptions, at first J. W. Riley, then James W. Riley, and after April, 1881, James Whitcomb Riley—"my full name for two reasons," he said; "first, because there were other James Rileys in Indianapolis and I kept getting letters from their girls; and second, to avoid confusion with that host of Rileys, named in good old-fashioned manner after the celebrated John Wesley."

After the success of "The Remarkable Man," it seemed assured that Riley's fortune lay with the *Journal.* In April, 1877, however, as seen in *The Youth of James Whitcomb Riley*, the poet cast his lot with the Anderson *Democrat*, and doubtless would have flourished there longer had not the Poe-Poem hoax overwhelmed him with chagrin and sent him to hide his diminished head in rural obscurity.

Speaking of him at this time, his chum, George Carr, said: "Riley did not have an extra coat to his name, but he did have genius. He was a small man with a most uncommon large head, and what he had inside

that head nobody, not even he himself, could tell. He was not a scholar, but he knew a great deal that scholars know, and a great deal that they do not know. It would have been a stiff job had we Fortville fellows attempted to take stock of what he knew. But, my dear sir, he took stock of things around him, don't forget that. The notes he made for poems and stories would fill a nail keg. His room was a confusion of notes. There were notes under his lamp, notes under his pillow, notes in his shoes, notes in his hat, notes pinned to the wall, and, unbelievable as it seems, there were notes crumpled away in the folds of his umbrella."

That the *Journal* had not lost its hold on Riley's affections is shown in a letter to the editor, dated September, 1877. The "excitement of doing nothing" had worn him out, and he was juggling a few ideas together in the hope of producing something that would interest *Journal* readers. The juggling, as he called it, resulted in one of the most delightful of Riley's longer dialect poems—"Squire Hawkins's Story." On reflection, however, Riley feared the *Journal* would reject the story, and rather than suffer that misfortune, he laid the poem aside and later sent it to the Indianapolis *Herald.* There were grounds for suspecting that the *Journal* did not care for the humorous in dialect, as shown in the following:

Greenfield, Indiana, January 11, 1878.
Mr. E. B. Martindale,
Dear Sir:

I write to enclose a poem for the *Journal,* and to ask in what particular—if any—the humorous items sent you Monday are not suitable for publication. I

Judge E. B. Martindale, Proprietor of the Indianapolis Journal—1875

JOHN C. NEW, PROPRIETOR OF THE INDIANAPOLIS JOURNAL, IN THE 'EIGHTIES

am more than eager to please you, and to be of service; and wherein I fail may be due only to my not comprehending fully the exact character of the work you asked me to do.

It may be an erroneous idea—certainly not an egotistical one to feel the assurance I do of pleasing the public with quaint paragraphs—at any rate I earnestly desire that the test be made, and if I fail, I will meet the disappointment like a man; and if I win, my pleasure shall be yours.

Will you do me the honor to write me a line or two when leisure affords, and tell me frankly where my failings are. Trusting you will favor me with this request, I am,

Ever gratefully yours,

J. W. RILEY.

Through 1878 and '79, Riley contributed to the *Journal* without marked interruption. "Send me your best effusions for the Sunday *Journal*," wrote Judge Martindale, in October, 1878. When the Judge received the Christmas story for the year, "The Boss Girl," (later entitled "Jamesy"), his demands became imperative. "Riley belongs to the *Journal*," said the Judge to Myron Reed. "He will come high; nevertheless we must have him."

Still the poet continued to "scatter." He was having a gay time with the weeklies. He wanted to be an out-and-out man of the world, wanted to travel, by which he meant walk and talk with his fellow Hoosiers of town and country. To be denied this would be a misfortune. "If I could be a *tolerated* factor in a newspaper office," he remarked to a friend, "the risk would not be so great; just loiter round the office, run through the files for exercise, and write a skit or two when the spirit moved—that would be ideal."

At a later period the poet gave other reasons for his delay in attaching himself exclusively to the *Journal* staff. "I had queer ideas of the value and destiny of poetry in those days," he remarked. "The fact that poetry was a commodity to be bought and paid for struck me as a kind of mythical idea. Particularly I was not reconciled to the thought of being paid for it by salary. Then, too, I had the rather whimsical notion that verse was something to be cut into strips, slices and bolts, and sold at so much per hunk. When I was asked to write poetry to order, I painfully realized the danger of letting verse slip through my fingers without receiving careful revision. In a word, I could not bring myself to think of writing stuff simply for money. That idea I have tried to hold to rigidly in all my work."

Riley also had overtures from other cities, one from the Terre Haute *Courier*, proffering a half interest in the paper, but his favorable reply was lost, and when, a year later, the letter was found in the Terre Haute post-office, the poet was safe in the arms of the *Journal*, at a salary of twenty-five dollars a week.

The decision—reached in November, 1879—was largely due to Myron Reed. "There is a certain disadvantage," wrote Reed, "in living in the town where you were born and raised—they will call you by your given name. Whatever you may become, people will grade you down to where you were; they will remember you as a boy. Their applause will not be generous or unanimous. If you have ever done anything ridiculous—and you have—it is remembered. Come West, young man, come to Indianapolis. Leave your mistakes behind."

Riley held similar views, but was slow to express them. "It is hard for old neighbors to praise a new author," he remarked a short time after moving to the city. "All the while they are thinking he can not do it, and their thinking so, though they do not suspect it, is a block in the way of his progress. It is the way of the world, you know; Greenfield is no more a sinner in this regard than other towns."

Reed counseled the proprietors of the *Journal* to "let Riley write *poems*. What was Burns' real work?" he asked. "Why, he whistled while he plowed, and at night wrote a song on a scrap of paper that suited the whistle. His *real* business—the songs he wrote—lasted."

Being established on the *Journal*, Riley began to write to his friends. "I have been coming to anchor here," he wrote one, November 27, 1879, "and have been neglecting everybody. Could not help it." To another he explained that he had been plunging away like a race-horse. "I am bothered about getting settled in this infernal city. I am not used to it, and don't believe I ever will be. Lots of features about it that are lovely, but the racket and rattle of it all is positively awful—no monotony on God's earth like it."

"I would rather be a houseless rover in a sylvan wilderness," was his word to a *Journal* employee. On several occasions he sighed for his nomadic days, when he "was not burdened with baggage, cares, or ambitions." In contrast to his early dislike for the city of his adoption, was his love of it twenty years later. Homeward bound from a long, weary reading tour, approaching the city in the early morning, just as familiar buildings were emerging from the shadows,

the treasured words of his old *Herald* friend, George Harding, fell from his lips: "I have returned to the dear old town to live and die among the people who know the best and the worst of me—to spend the remainder of my life with friends who have been friends to me when I was not a friend to myself." This was not the poet's remark on one home-coming only. Again and again he repeated the words, and almost always added that "the one sure way of getting a correct appreciation of Indianapolis is to go away from it."

Thus, as Bill Nye expressed it, Riley was employed on the *Journal* Works. Thus his love began to make a shrine of "the good, old *Journal* office," which in years to follow was "always like home" to him. "He was lonesome at first," said a *Journal* employee. "Standing on the street corners after his poem had been contributed to the daily issue, he looked like a farmer, who had come to town because it was too wet to plow." Soon, however, he made friends of the reportorial force and began the nightly custom of lunching at cheap restaurants, Miles', on Market Street, being the favorite resort of the "gang."

"There was an ambition concealed about my person," said Riley, "as I towered above Welsh rarebit and mince pie, and I was quite hopeful that one day the world at large would know of it. Along with my ambition came a notice that I was delinquent to the tune of twenty dollars in taxes due the State of Indiana, County of Marion. The county treasurer openly informed me that the law made it his duty to levy on and sell my personal property unless said tax was paid, and would I please tuck my little delinquent

notice in my pocket, and call and settle and relieve him of a disagreeable duty.

"There came also with my Hudibrastic ambition," Riley continued, "a juicy request from the leading merchant of Wabash Town that I return the five dollars I borrowed while publishing his name and business to the world on barns and fences. This—that—and a thousand other vexations did at last awaken in my blind perceptive faculty the conviction that a little kickshaw poet in a big city is not worth a tomtit on a pump handle. The Fates kept boring, and by and by it dawned on my Waterbury mentality that my twenty-five dollars a week in the city was not equal to my two dollars a poem in Greenfield."

Whether his wages were average or small, the poet seemed hopelessly incapable of saving anything out of them. Like a boy, he must promptly spend his earnings. An early friend relates that soon after receiving his first check from the *Journal*, Riley was in the city one day, when his eye fell on a red silk hat in a Washington Street shop window. Price five dollars. Its flaming color was more than the poet could stand. He must have it, and at last the dealer parted with it for four dollars, the total amount in Riley's pocket. All he had left was a return-trip ticket to Greenfield.

A collection of impressions of Riley when he came to the *Journal* would include such terms as—undistinguished-looking—unripe in knowledge and green in judgment—an unsuspecting nature—immature and inexperienced — unaffected, straightforward, simple. Charles Martindale of Indianapolis, city editor of the *Journal* at the time, remembers that among writers

and contributors to the paper, Riley—interesting to the *nth* degree—was, in manners and dress, about the most diverting and conspicuous example of agricultural verdancy it had been his good fortune to meet.

Senator Harry S. New gives an impression of the poet as he knew him in those diffident days, when Riley, in his own words, "groaned under a pyramid of bashfulness and misery." The Senator was then police court reporter on the *Journal*—no more dreaming of a seat in the United States Senate than did Riley of glory and renown.

"My first impression of the poet," said the Senator, "was that of a young man, modest to the point of diffidence, clad in a suit evidently bought in a Greenfield store with the idea that it would about meet the demands of the metropolis. He was not only modest, but bashful—almost painfully so.

"We had desks in the same room at the old Indianapolis *Journal* office and became not only friends, but boon companions at the very start. Perhaps this was the natural result of the fact that the nature of my work and Riley's predilection for late hours brought us together in the moments of our leisure, after the paper had gone to press. I have seen him sit for long periods at his old desk, under one of the old-style lamps used in newspaper offices of that day, occupied not in serious effort, but in drawing quaint pictures and fancy lettering. In fact, I don't believe he ever produced a single thing at that desk that found its way into print. This he did in his room, wherever that happened to be during frequent changes, before he 'settled down' on Lockerbie Street. He was one of the most inveterate jokers I ever knew, and many a night

I have sat with him and George Harding or Romeo Johnson in 'Pop' June's restaurant from two A. M. till long after daylight, listening to Riley's stories, imitations and improvisations. The introduction of an outsider always stopped his hilarity; his modesty caused him to draw into his shell in the presence of strangers. It was only with his intimates that his wonderful versatility showed itself.

"He was one of the most unusual characters I ever knew. There is no one with whom to compare him. His personality was as individual as his writing. No man who knew him, particularly in the early days, could ever forget him."

Among the poet's Indianapolis friends was Anna Nicholas, who had just been promoted to the editorial rooms of the *Journal.* She knew Riley in his "comedian days," as he phrased it, when his long fiery mustache was a distinguishing feature.

"Riley had other talents than that of writing verse," Miss Nicholas said. "He was witty, full of dry humor, and possessed an inimitable gift of story-telling. And so he was made welcome in many and varying circles. One of these was what might be called the Informal Club, a group of men whose habit was usually in the forenoons to drop into the private office of the *Journal's* owner and publisher. Among the notable men of this group were Myron Reed, William P. Fishback, a brilliant lawyer, Benjamin Harrison, and Elijah W. Halford, afterward President Harrison's private secretary."

Another Riley Indianapolis friend of those days was the newspaper correspondent, Miss Laura Ream. "It makes a big part of the sunshine of my daily life," she

wrote, "to fall in with James Whitcomb Riley, which I am apt to do any fine morning that I make the circuit of the newspaper offices. His abiding-place is the cosy ground-floor office of the *Journal*, but it is his favorite habit to saunter up and down the sunny side of Washington Street, peering into shop windows, or into the faces of all he meets, with his near-sighted expression, as much as to say, is this any one I should know? The young fair-haired man would be recognized by a stranger as an artist of some kind, most likely a musician, for the turn of the head, slightly inclined to the left, is that of a violinist, with ear intent upon what he hears. It would not be a mistake wild of the mark, for the poet is keenly alive to all the voices of Nature and human nature."

As has been said, there were as many portraits of Riley as there were observers. It is evident, for instance, that Senator New knew a Riley Judge Martindale did not know, and Miss Nicholas knew a Riley Miss Ream did not know, and his intimates a Riley the public did not know. In a sense, every man, particularly the artistic and the temperamental, lives several lives and presents various aspects at various times. All of which adds to the difficulties of the biographer's task. "He may construct an episode," writes Albert Bigelow Paine, "present a picture, or reflect a mood by which the reader may know a little of the substance of the past. At best his labor will be pathetically incomplete, for whatever the detail of his work and its resemblance to life, these will record mainly but an outward expression, behind which was the mighty sweep and tumult of unwritten thought, the over-

whelming proportion of any life, which no other human soul can ever really know."

In a revised paragraph of an early unpublished story, Riley portrays himself in a picturesque individual, who dwells in the primitive village of Paradise Point, and who fondly displays in front of his cottage

> "A poet's sign on a slender slat
> Swinging in the wind like an acrobat."

When he came to the *Journal*, the early vision still possessed him. The last night of the year 1879, while "snowy December was tapping on the window-pane," he stares dreamily at the pictures on the office wall—a map of Mexico, a colored lithograph of Washington, and a gray dusty bust of Gutenberg on a shelf. He leans back in his chair, blinks his eyes and looks again—

> "A file of papers from a rack
> Unfolds a pair of legs, and then
> A pair of arms, and leaps and stands
> In pleading posture at his chair,
> With fluttering pages, and a pair
> Of cruel scissors in its hands."

At the moment the old clock on the shelf, whose habit is "to make timely remarks," points its finger at the poet and "wonders if he sees the point";

> "And then it goes off in a fit
> Of pealing laughter, loud and long,
> And all the pictures join in it,
> And cry aloud, 'A song! A song!'"

The frosty air seems to be haunted with a mystic symphony. The poet hears the music of harps and violins:

"And then a voice of such a tone
Of tenderness and merriment
He does not know it as his own,
And welling strangely over all,
Sweet words upon his senses fall."

After listening a while, in his dream, to the voices of children, whispers of love, and peals of laughter, the poet starts up abruptly and stares about him in blank surprise. He is back in the world of editors, printers and pressmen—but he has answered the summons of the Muse. Having

"Sung the song—the echoes fled
In merriment around the room—
Old Gutenberg stood on his head
And brushed his whiskers with a broom—
The file of papers scrambled back
To its old perch upon the rack—
And Washington, upon the wall,
Looked gravely at the clock and said—
'Toll lightly, the Old Year is dead—
A happy New Year to you all!'"

So it may be said that Riley entered the year 1880 with the signet of song on his brow, the *Journal*, in the main, permitting him to "do his own work in his own way." True, he wrote prose, particularly during the two years following—such sketches as "Eccentric Mr. Clark," "Where Is Mary Alice Smith?" "The Boy From Zeeny," and such editorials as "The Giant on the Show-Bills," "The Way We Walk," "The Old

Fiddler" and "Mr. Trillpipe on Puns," but they were not written with the seriousness of purpose that he wrote song. To say it as the poet said it, he "wrote prose with a kind of feeling that he had gone over to the enemy."

Throughout 1880 Riley was "up to his ears in work," scarcely had time to hear the venerable Bronson Alcott talk before the Women's Club. Letters came from friends, some to compliment, some to warn against the "loss of leisure" and the danger of "intrepid haste in composition." "You are like a violin with all the strings let down," wrote Ella Wheeler; "the strings must be drawn up slowly or they will snap." "All kinds of graces and good fortune attend you," wrote B. S. Parker; "the sacred Nine still fall upon your consecrated head."

In May, 1880, the ownership of the *Journal* was transferred to John C. New and son. With the transfer came a change of policy. The managing editor wanted to make the paper measure up to big newspaper standards—"the world's history of a day." Riley preferred to "see it blossom with the quiet grandeur of simple things." The editor wanted humorous editorials and he wanted Riley to write them—and he wanted them to be ready at the call for "copy." Riley could not work under such a strain, had to write when he felt like it, and could not produce when crowded. "You want me to write poetry at *odd* times," said he; "I want poetry to be the *chief* consideration—editorials, secondary."

The managing editor made strenuous efforts to curtail expenses. To pay for poetry did not pay. "The way that editor tracked innocent expenditures to their

origin and lambasted their victims was atrocious," said Riley. "He knew everything that was going on; every morning he knew which cockroach had sipped the most paste the night before."

Riley did not serve the *Journal* as a reporter, although he mingled freely with the "boys" when night came. "I had a peculiar position," he said. "My editor-in-chief was one of the most indulgent men in the world and let me do pretty much as I pleased. I wrote when I felt like it, and when I did not, nothing was said. At first when called on for a certain thing by a certain time I grew apprehensive and nervous, but I soon solved the problem. I learned to keep a stack of poems and prose on hand, and when there was a big hole in the paper and they called for 'copy' I gave them all they wanted. Sometimes it would be a book review, again a so-called editorial, and oftener some odds and ends that I had written in spare moments—and once a week perhaps an unsigned skit or a jingle for the old cigar box" (a receptacle in the office for anonymous contributions).

"As time passed," continued Riley, "my managing editor grew more charitable. He continued, however, to look to quantity more than quality. The reporters were my friends, too. Some of them went in and out among the farmers; they would talk and listen to them and then report to me. There was one clerk who remembered to tell me the quaint and curious things that were said when subscribers came to sign for the paper. A friend on the Indianapolis *News* did the same.

"An advantage, or disadvantage, of the newspaper profession," Riley continued, "is that its members are

compelled to know the shams of the world, the weakness of the community, its vanities and mistakes. All of which flowed through the *Journal* rooms—dull speakers called to have it said in print that they were eloquent—women wanted to shine in the society column—men in the wrong wanted to be reported right—and now and then a crack-brained philosopher came with a story as long as his linen duster—and bores came asking two minutes of time and taking two hours. The world with its excellence and follies flows through the reportorial rooms. Thus, I had a constant and inexhaustible supply of new expressions from all sorts and conditions of men, and new ideas simply or extravagantly told. Many of the phrases picked up in this way were ready for use without polishing, for the speech of the people is usually full of rhythm, if we have the ear to hear it; and it is usually direct. Thus, I was brought into contact with all phases of life. My journalistic work gave me an insight into human nature, which I could have acquired in no other way. It taught me also to try to give the public what it wants."

The poet expressed his debt to the newspaper at a banquet given the "boys" soon after he came to the *Journal*. "The weighty honor of saying a few words" being laid upon him, he referred to the press as "a vast jury that industriously and tirelessly supplied verdicts on all the great and leading questions of the age. It had grown to its present magnificent proportions on our prolific American soil. Its eagle eye was to see everything, ferret out crime, condemn and execute criminals, stand sentinel to the general good, stir up the lethargy of the body politic, and last and not

least, preserve literature, and in particular promote the general welfare by circulating songs that warm the public heart."

It was eminently characteristic of the poet to do things by extremes. In July and August, 1881, humor predominated in his editorials. "It has been suggested by our readers," he wrote, "that the *Journal* really ought to have its columns embellished with something sunny-like, not too much fun in it, you know, but just enough."

As the humorist of the *Journal,* Riley sometimes disguised himself as Mr. Trillpipe. In one issue Mr. Trillpipe paid his respects to that elder daughter of discomfort—Homesickness. "I want to say right here," he wrote, "that of all diseases, afflictions or complaints, this thing of being homesick takes the cookies. A man may think when he has an aggravated case of jaundice, or white-swelling, or bone-erysipelas, that he is to be looked up to as a being quite well fixed in the line of trouble and unrest, but I want to tell you, when I want my sorrow blood-raw, you may give me homesickness—straight goods, you know—and I will get more clean legitimate agony out of that than you can out of either of the other attractions—or of all combined. You see, there is but one way of treating homesickness—and that is to get back home—but that is a remedy you can not get at a drug store at so much per box! and if you could, and had only enough money to cover half the cost of a full box—and nothing but a full box ever reaches the case—why, it follows that your condition remains critical. Homesickness shows no favors. She is just as liable to strike you as to strike me. High or low, rich or

poor, all come under her jurisdiction, and whenever she once reaches for a citizen she *gets there* every time! She does not confine herself to youth, nor make a specialty of little children. She stalks abroad like a census-taker, and is as conscientious.

"I will never forget," continued Mr. Trillpipe, "the last case of homesickness I had and the cure I took for it. It has not been more than a week ago, either. You see my old home is too many laps from this base to make it very often, and in consequence I had not been there for five years and better until this last trip, when I just succumbed to the pressure and threw up my hands and went. It was glorious to rack 'round the old town again, things looking about the same as they did when I was a boy, don't you know. Ran across an old schoolmate and took supper with him at his happy little home. Then we walked and talked. He took me all around, you understand, in the mellow twilight, as it were, till the first thing you know, there stood the old schoolhouse where we first learned to chew gum and play truant. Well, sir, you have no idea of my feelings. Why, I felt as if I could throw my arms around the dear old building till the cupola would just pop out of the top of the roof like the core of a carbuncle, don't you know—and I think if ever there was an epoch in my life when I could have tackled poetry without the sting of conscience, that was the time!" (The irony of this is more apparent when one recalls the poet's miseries over arithmetic in the old building.)

Although appearances seemed to contradict it, the fact was that Riley did not detach himself from the home of his youth. For several years scarcely a fort-

night passed without his return to Greenfield. He would "toil prodigiously" for a while and then suddenly answer the call of a willow-whistle. He would leave a note on the editor's desk: "Here is a little lullaby song you may use for Sunday issue, if it pleases you, and a nonsense jingle, perhaps not worthy to use at all, but if not, preserve it, and I will get it when I return. Going down home for a day or two to smoke my segyar."

"He would lose interest in the struggle," said the *Journal* editor, "and would stamp up and down our reportorial rooms moaning for the sight of sunflowers in the lane or a martin box in the garden, talking about the showers of sunshine on the fields and the restful lullabies of the rain." "We have been waiting so long," he wrote, in such a mood.

"And O so very homesick we have grown,
The laughter of the world is like a moan
In our tired hearing, and its song as vain,—
We must get home—we must get home again!"

Sometimes his stay would be overlong and the managing editor would have to hurry a post-card to Greenfield—"Proof is waiting; come on first train." Usually, however, the smiles of old friends would soon restore the poet's "lost youth"—and then "the desire to see his thoughts in cold type" promptly returned him to the *Journal;* back, he said, "to ask the boys how to spell a word"; back to the friends who would coddle his "ambition for a place in the world of letters."

CHAPTER V

SUCCESS ON THE PLATFORM

RILEY received much wise counsel, not a little helpful criticism and a great deal of praise, out of which developed the resolve to cultivate his gift.

He wisely did not put himself under an elocutionist, but he did conscientiously strive to perfect his style of delivery. The best school he thought was an audience of men and women, and so he eagerly joined in amateur entertainments, aiding in commencement exercises, church festivals and concerts. At Indianapolis he left off writing a poem, hurried to the First Baptist Church, and by request recited "The Tree Toad" and "The Object Lesson," at the end of a long musical program.

Sometimes he would slip into a convention to discover if he could the secret of some orator's power, often relate anecdotes and stories to his friends, and always when the chance offered, study the accent and gestures of children. His friend, D. S. Alexander, then correspondent of the Chicago *Tribune,* wrote most happily of things the poet did and why he did them. It was a day in August, 1879—103 degrees in the shade, but not too hot for the poet "to perfect his style of delivery." He was in the woods on White River, eight or ten miles above the city. After high noon and boiled coffee, Riley rose before his little audi-

ence—two newspaper correspondents and an inquisitive boy—and told "The Bear Story," and then gave "a little dissertation on the peanut," which made his audience exceedingly noisy.

"What will you do with this marvelous gift?" asked Alexander, as soon as he could control his laughter.

"Cultivate it, I suppose," answered Riley. "Wish I could earn my living by it."

"Riley's power of imitation," wrote the correspondent, "is certainly wonderful. Sothern in the *Crushed Tragedian* is not more happy than Riley in his imitation of Colonel Ingersoll, Schuyler Colfax, and other popular lecturers. He never heard Ingersoll but once, and yet he caught the salient points of his style. The tone of voice, the happy gesture, and the full round sentences, flushed with the imagery of poetry, are copied with an exactness that must delight even the famous orator himself."

Riley took particular pride in his imitation of Ingersoll and was keenly disappointed when he realized that it was a failure.

"While it is not my intention," Riley would say in introducing the imitation, "to descant upon the merits of Robert G. Ingersoll as an orator, or to express any opinion as to whether our peculiar views are in direct unison or not, I desire to preface the sketch I am about to offer, by the admission that his oratory, upon the one occasion that I listened to him held me as nearly spellbound, for two hours as, perhaps, the tongue of eloquence will ever hold me. And I will admit further that I did not attend his speech to listen in that way—but rather for the purpose of studying his oratory, and getting, if possible, an idea of the way he

did it. I venture the assertion that his peculiar power will enable him to take up any subject—no matter how inviolate and incontrovertible in its fixed relations with the laws of fact, and discuss that subject to its seeming defamation. As an example, let us select a topic, 'Friendship,' for instance, and I think it will require no unusual stretch of fancy to imagine the great orator assaulting it."

Then followed a volley in the style of Ingersoll's assaults on creeds and the Bible. "What has Friendship ever done for man?" Riley asked. "What ship of commerce has it ever launched upon the sea? What foreign shore has it ever set its foot upon but to crush it in the dust?"

Notwithstanding the poet's efforts to improve it, the Ingersoll imitation was a failure. There was something about it that even the orthodox church-member did not like. For similar reasons, "blue ribbon" societies and baseball enthusiasts were displeased with another imitation, "Benson Out-Bensoned," although Riley did his utmost to conciliate them. "Before proceeding with this number," said Riley to his audience, "I desire to call particular attention to the fact that it was written and published as a satire on a game the world has gone mad over. Containing for its central figure, a character who is prominent in the Temperance field, I would not have the imitation construed into a burlesque upon a theme of such moral importance; much less reflect discredit upon a man whose genius has ever challenged the highest admiration. I refer to Luther Benson, a man whose hopeless misfortune can not sink him beyond the reach of my warmest love and sympathy."

After "trying" them for three years the imitations were retired. Throughout Indiana in those promising platform days, were friends who longed for the poet's success as they would for a personal triumph. They were heavy at heart whenever he did things beneath the higher levels of his genius, and had a happy way of communicating their criticisms to the Indianapolis *Journal.* One day there came a letter from Liberty, Indiana. "Last evening," wrote the correspondent, "J. W. Riley appeared before a Liberty audience for the second time within the last fortnight. His characterization is perfect. In the presence of his genius our illusion is complete, and in laughter and tears we accompany him in the rendition of his sketches and poems. There is but one criticism to be made on his entertainments, and that is the Benson and Ingersoll imitations, which he renders with such abandon. They are each well enough in their way, but they are typical of nothing worth preserving, and so far below the original freshness and purity of his own unique productions, that the contrast is painfully apparent. He would do well to eschew them forevermore."

It was a center shot. "Forevermore," repeated Riley to a reporter. "No more mocking-bird business. Be that word our sign of parting." At a later period Riley remarked that he sat for a long while in the *Journal* office, grave, mute and lonely as the bust of Gutenberg—"but the imitations had to go."

The year 1879 set at rest the question of Riley's ability as a public entertainer. Men slow to give judgment were confident he had qualities of genius that would eminently distinguish him on the platform. Terms for his entertainment were raised from

fifteen dollars and expenses to twenty-five dollars. "I am simply compelled to ask a fair price," he wrote a committee, "since it is through this means that I hope to gain a revenue sufficient to forward my literary studies." Hand-bills announced him "the Poet Laureate of Indiana,—a feast of reason and a flow of soul," and here and there small committees began to share the Carlyle observation that a true poet, a man in whose heart resides some tone of the eternal melodies, is the most precious gift that can be bestowed upon a generation. Responsible citizens, having listened to the poet with pleasure, signed a paper for a return engagement. Fifty business and professional men of Newcastle, having braved "the rain and slush of a dark night," sent such an invitation that Riley might have the opportunity to appear again under more favorable conditions.

In September he prepared a new lecture, though he did not want it called a lecture, that treated of poetry and character. "In the broadest sense, poetry, should I attempt to define it," said Riley in his new talk, "is a spiritual essence, whose flavor purifies and sweetens all our being, and makes us more and more like true men—just, and generous, and humane."

Always there was praise of his favorite poet. "The happiest forms of poetic expression," he continued, "are cast in simplest phraseology. The student of poetic composition is not long in finding that the secret of enduring verse lies in spontaneity of expression, and the grace of pure simplicity. Longfellow has furnished many notable examples, first among which I class the poem, 'The Day Is Done.' It is like resting to read it. It is like bending with silent, uncovered

head beneath the benediction of the stars. It is infinitely sorrowful, and yet so humanely comforting, one can but breathe a blessing on the kindly heart from which is poured the

'Feeling of sadness and longing,
That is not akin to pain.'

"The tribute of true praise," he went on, "may oftimes rest upon the vagrant verses of a singer all unknown to fame. Somewhere years ago I remember clipping from an obscure country paper, a little poem, which to me has always seemed a solitaire of rhythmical excellence. It was an orphan, too, without a friend or relative in all the world to claim it, but I took the little gypsy home with me to love it always." (He did not then know that Mary Kyle Dallas is its author. But he told its happy name, "Brave Love," and recited it.)

As he did so Riley's radiance of affection was such that his audience seemed to see and feel and touch and taste poetry. They saw it in the falling shadows of the dusk, they felt it in the unbroken silence of the night. They tasted it "in the wine of love that ripened in their hearts and rose to their eyelids in warm tears."

Before going far into the lecture, Riley called attention to "the fact that the nearer the approach to Nature, in language, expression and unobtrusive utterance, the higher the value of Character and Poetry." In illustration of this "simple fact," he submitted to his hearers two poems—"Farmer Whipple, Bachelor" and "An Old Sweetheart of Mine." The effect of the

latter was magical—magical then, and always afterward.

Then came the poet's defense of dialect. There had been in educational circles opposition to its use, and in some quarters the objection had rankled with bitterness. "While it would seem that the very choicest specimens of our modern dialectic verse, such as produced by Bret Harte, John Hay and others," said the lecturer, "are destined to survive the fleeting recognition of the daily press, it becomes something of a problem to the student why the dialectic poetry of Burns should yet be living on, as fresh and sweet to-day as when an age ago it cropped above the heather bells of Scotland in a bloom of song that filled the whole world with its fragrance. And while it remains a truth that the 'Cantie blether o' the Hielands' affords a singularly musical and rich vernacular, I am inclined to think that our own native dialect, with the exception, perhaps, of ungrammatical abandon, is scarcely the inferior of the Scotch, if we but pause to contemplate it with more seriousness, for in our hurried notice of it we catch nothing of its deeper worth; only its lighter attributes are visible. With our fickle knowledge of all its deeper worth and purity, it is little wonder that its mission is so often debased to serve the ends of the rhyming punsters and poetical thugs of our 'Comic Weeklies,' until at last its standing in the literary field may be likened more to the character of a lawless intruder than a dear, old-fashioned friend who comes to shake a hearty hand with us, and gossip of the good old days 'when you and I were young.' The idea has become popular that the dialectic poem must necessarily be done in the slangiest

phraseology, with copious suggestions of vulgarity, and 'milky-ways' of asterisks, which the reader is left to pepper out with his own choice of expletives. This is all wrong. The field of dialect is flowered over with the rarest growth of poesy, and its bloom is no less fragrant because it springs from loam, and flourishes among the weeds. However dialectic expression may have been abused, certain it is that in no expression is there better opportunity for the reproduction of pure nature. In artlessness of construction the dialectic poem may attain even higher excellence than the more polished specimens of English. Its great defect seems to be that, as written or printed, the real feeling it contains is overlooked by the reader in the contemplation of its oddity. That it is more widely copied by the press than any other type of versification, I am inclined to think, is the result of a superficial regard for its general abandon rather than a wholesome recognition of its real worth, which, though always more than half buried in the debris of rhetoric, is the more precious when unearthed. Hence it is that we are so tardy in admitting it has any worth whatever, much less its very superior worth of character and truthfulness to life. In defense of it I would offer a poem entitled 'Old-Fashioned Roses,' the language of an old-timer, who once took the trouble to explain to me his love of the flowers about his doorway."

At one point, Carmel, Indiana, the poet lectured in a church, and friends observed that he seemed quite at home in the pulpit. The old-fashioned roses made an impression inexpressibly sweet. They were not gaudy; there was no style about them, yet their owner, the old man, could not do without them:

"He was happier in the posies,
And the hollyhawks and sich,
Than the hummin' bird 'at noses
In the roses of the rich."

"Observe," said the poet to his hearers, "how the flowers suggest to our old-time friend the good old-fashioned words, and that he can no more do without the words than he can do without the roses. Colleges may disown him but God does not. Poetry is purity," Riley affirmed, laying his hand reverently on the Bible. "Where purity abounds, poetry abounds. This Book of Books says the pure in heart shall see God. Our old man in the doorway was poetic because his heart was pure. He had the poetry of character, and will, I believe, as certainly see God as the fishermen saw Him, who walked with Jesus by the Sea of Galilee."

It was possible for "the rhyming punsters, by their lawless operations, to damage the dignity of the Hoosier idiom beyond recovery. As an instance of the tendency to degrade it, Riley offered next on the program "a rambling dissertation on the Tree Toad."

Before leaving a theme which to him at least "had for a long time been a source of infinite interest and delight," he asked his audience "to bear with the narration of a story from real life—'Tradin' Joe.'"

When Riley, years before, recited the poem from the steps of the Wizard Oil wagon—to tell it in his own words—"I thrust a hand in my pocket, and rumpling with the other my hair to fluffiness, drew over my features a sly look of conceit and self-assurance, turned up the corners of my eyes and mouth, and recited the lines in a rasping yet not altogether unmelodious drawl." In the lecture Riley retained the

drawl, but almost all the other features of the early rendition were omitted as being beneath the dignity of the platform.

The opinion prevailed that, over and over again, in his selections, Riley characterized himself—for instance, in "Tradin' Joe," the poet was the fellow that folks call "slow"—

> "And I'll say jest here I'm kind o' queer
> Regardin' things 'at I *see* and *hear;*
> Fer I'm *thick* o' hearin' *sometimes,* and
> It's hard to git me to understand;
> But other times it hain't, you bet!
> Fer I don't sleep with both eyes shet!"

Always the audience was made aware, by quaint accent, tone of voice and delicacy of gesture that the poet, though appearing inattentive, was nevertheless seeing everything with superior intelligence.

After narrating the pathetic story of a German father in the poem "Dot Leedle Boy of Mine," Riley proceeded to "bring down the house" with a number that had been popular since the night he first read it in Lovett's parlor at Anderson. His hearers had been warned to "have their buttons well sewed on," if they did not want to lose them when they came to "The Object Lesson." "His triumph in the number," said Myron Reed, "was largely due to a *secret laughter* that tickled the poet's soul. He imitated a general type of the time, and that was the reason audiences never failed to recognize it. The Educator was not confined to out-of-the-way places, but was found in large cities as well. He was a picturesque donkey and none enjoyed his caricature more than the teach-

ers. The humor did not require a long, psychological analysis with charts to explain it."

Riley had first met the Educator at a county teachers' institute at Anderson, Indiana, but for obvious reasons he disguised the fact. "Barely a year ago," he said, introducing "The Object Lesson," "I attended the Friday afternoon exercises of a country school. Among a host of visitors was a pale young man of thirty years, perhaps, with a tall head and bulging brow, and a highly intellectual pair of eyes and spectacles. He wore his hair without 'roach' or 'part,' and his smile was 'a joy forever.' He was an educator—from the East, I think I heard it rumored—anyway when he was introduced to the school, at last, he bowed and smiled and beamed upon us and entertained us in the most delightfully edifying manner imaginable. Although I may fail to reproduce the exact substance of his remarks on that highly important occasion, I think I can at least present his theme in all its coherency of detail. Addressing particularly the primary grade of the school, he said:

" 'As the little exercise I am about to introduce is of recent origin, and the bright, intelligent faces of the pupils before me seem rife with eager and expectant interest, it will be well for me perhaps to offer by way of preparatory preface a few terse words of explanation. The Object Lesson—the Object Lesson is designed to fill a long-felt want, and is destined, as I think, to revolutionize in a great degree the educational systems of our land. In my belief the Object Lesson will supply a want which I may safely say has heretofore left the most egregious and palpable traces of mental confusion and intellectual inadequacies

stamped, as it were, upon the gleaming reasons of the most learned, the highest cultured, and most eminently gifted and promising of our professors and scientists both at home—and abroad.' "

Such was the introduction and first paragraph of a recitation that required fifteen minutes in delivery. The "toplofty" language, the utterly ridiculous relation of the "picturesque donkey" to the pupils, was apparent to the audience from the first. The Educator, bobbing up and down at intervals on his toes, his body "statuesque and straight as a candle," with his hands clasped in front as children do in making the "church steeple," his thumbs up and the index fingers pointing outward across the footlights, was a picture as unforgetable as it was ridiculous and convulsing.

The last number on the program was "The Bear Story." Always in telling it, memory went back along "the truant paths of childhood." "In all the boundless range of character," said Riley, introducing the story, "there is no field so universally attractive, and at the same time so lightly dwelt upon, as that presented by child-life. There is no phase of it but is filled to overflowing with the rarest interest. In the blossom-faces of the children the sunshine nestles in its fairest light, and in the ever-wondering eyes of baby-innocence we see reflected back the misty lotus-lands of every joy. And there is one characteristic of the child of five that I would reproduce. Every parent will remember with what rare delight he has marked the ever-varying features of the listening toddler at the knee as he hears recounted for the hundredth time the story of 'Red Riding Hood' or 'Jack

The Giant Killer' or the far-famed history of 'The Three Bears.' And every parent will remember, too, with what astonishment and pleasure he has listened in return to the crude attempts of the miniature romancer, as the spirit of inventive genius first invests the youthful mind in the little home-made sketches of the wonderful that he weaves from his own fancy. Such a study I will endeavor to present, with scarcely an embellishment of my own—for the language, as I give it, is almost word for word the original."

In *A Child-World*, the story appears essentially as Riley told it back in 1879. Its success on the platform lay in the poet's power to transfigure "the babble of baby-lips" and make it as dear to parents as the sunny lispings of their own young hopefuls. A second factor in its success was the poet's lively memory of it as when—a boy of twenty-two—he told the story by lantern light to a crowd of youngsters on a village street in Henry County.

Riley made his first Indianapolis hit in March, 1879, in an entertainment by home artists at the Grand Opera House. His second appearance, October 16, popularly termed The Park Theater Benefit, deserves more liberal notice.

The city's literary group had been interested in the "Greenfield Poet" from the time he began to contribute to the *Journal*, and it was out of this group that the first impulse for a public testimonial developed, developed while the poet was still a resident of Greenfield. Business men interested themselves in it, among them General Daniel Macauley, whose love of the poet was genuine and deep-seated. "Riley

is the greatest bard south of 54:40," said he. The date for the "Benefit" having been selected, the General wrote Riley as follows:

Water Works Company, 23 South Pennsylvania Street,
Indianapolis, September 16, 1879.

Dear Boy:

Will at once secure the theatre and will give you particulars. You don't need one cent—don't think of it. We will do *everything* and if there is profit it is yours—if not it is *ours*. We esteem it a privilege and an honor, and if we mistake not our people will "Boom" for you. The public is a capricious beast and may have some d—d fool engagement that night elsewhere, but we propose to give them an all-fired good chance to "come and see us." You have no more care, nothing more to do with it but to come over and speak your piece and "collar the boodle" afterwards. We blow out in the *Herald* this week, and then fire all along the line.

Your pard,
DANIEL MACAULEY.

NEW PARK THEATER
Thursday Evening, October 16 (1879)
Complimentary Testimonial to
MR. J. W. RILEY
THE INDIANA POET
Tendered by the citizens of Indianapolis
An Evening of Original Character
Sketches and Dialectic Readings

was the "blow out" in the *Herald*, and from that moment the success of the "Benefit" was assured. Whatever General Macauley undertook for other people, it was said, always succeeded. As the time

approached Riley mailed complimentary tickets to literary friends—the "host of contributors" who the year past had united with him to make a name for themselves and the Kokomo *Tribune*. "The Little Man is to have a big house—the promise is most flattering," he wrote, "and my lecture (Poetry and Character) I really think is one that you will approve." "Don't you dare to forget me," he wrote another. "Fe-fi-fo-fum! You *must* come. Will have many literary friends I want you to meet. Am humming like a telegraph pole. Chrlpkin aprrrrooommmm!!! Yours gaspingly, J. W. R."

"A week before," said Riley, "I went over to the city to stay till the lecture; had to buy sleeve buttons, shoe strings, and have my justly celebrated complexion powdered." This was amusing enough when he said it, years after the lecture, but it was a tragic week of suspense. He was on the gridiron. If he made good in Indianapolis, he could make good throughout Indiana.

"I am anxious for your success," wrote his young sister Mary from home. "With this, accept my kindest wishes in a shower of flowers with peals of applause and encores ringing in your ears." So the "Benefit" proved to be, notwithstanding counter-attractions, including a circus, a minstrel show, a rainstorm, and the enormous advance sale of seats for the brilliant young Mary Anderson in *Evadne*.

The beautiful theater, according to the newspaper report, was well filled with a cultured and critical audience. The poet was introduced by General Macauley, who was extremely felicitous, not only in what he said but in his manner of saying it. He put

the audience in the best of humor and broke the ice always present on occasions when one does not know just what is to come. "To me," the General said, "has been assigned the duty of introducing Mr. Riley—a duty which I perform with pride and pleasure. I admit that from the remarkable surfeit of other attractions in town this week, I began to fear it might be more economical to introduce the audience to Mr. Riley. Fortunately all is well in that direction. I am willing to allow, even in the gentleman's presence, that, being human, he must necessarily in some degree be sinful, but what atrocious thing he can have committed to have had a whole circus thrown at him, is more than we can guess. I would say to Mr. Riley that we are proud of the efforts he is making, and the fame he is winning for himself and for us his neighbors, throughout our country. In our strongest terms of endearment and encouragement, we tell him to go forward as he has begun. The time will come, we fondly hope and believe—if his riper years fulfill the promise of his youth—when something akin to the Scotch pride in Burns shall be felt by us for him."

When the evening seemed fairly under way, Riley made his bow and retired. The applause continuing, General Macauley came to the front with the remark that before the lecture Riley had asked him what he should talk about and he had answered, "about an hour." The hour was up. The demonstration continuing, Riley appeared again, responding with a second child-sketch, and then the curtain fell for the night.

The Indianapolis papers were most appreciative. The *Sentinel* was proud that the young state poet had

done himself and the city mutual credit. With experience and cultivation he could tread the boards alongside the foremost comedians of the time. The *News* was certain his fertility and exuberance of imagination and his power of delineation would make him one of the first readers of America.

There were two newspaper men whose praise was most desired, George Harding and Berry Sulgrove. "If we gain those fellows," said General Macauley to the poet, "we have gained all." They differed from each other in many ways, but both spoke the truth fearlessly. What would they say? "Some day," wrote Harding, "Riley will have a national fame, and it will be worth something to us to know that we appreciated the poet and attested our appreciation before everybody else did."

"Nothing succeeds like success," wrote Sulgrove in the *Herald*, "and Mr. Riley may take his first venture on the stage, or the platform, in this city, as an omen of a promising hereafter. Casting his horoscope to an hour on the dial of time two years hence, and then looking a couple of years down the course of events, he may see himself among the most attractive of public lecturers. His fortune lies with himself now, and he will wrong his powers and his opportunities if he does not win it."

After the "Benefit" both Harding and Sulgrove talked to Riley personally about his recitations. Harding assured him that his perception of character was "as keen as that of our famous actors and more sensitive to delicate traits."

Both friends advised the poet to weed out the didactic part of his lecture. It was irrelevant—a general

dissertation on poetry was unnecessary. "You are not a critic; you are a poet and an actor." Riley did not immediately follow the suggestion, but as he said, "came round to their peg two years later."

The "Benefit" was truly a milestone. Thence forward Riley reached out over the state. One evening he "dropped down to Bloomington," he said, "to twitter to the students." So far as known, only one student was present, William Lowe Bryan, now president of the University. "I am not sure," writes the president, "that I heard Mr. Riley's first reading in Bloomington. I remember, however, hearing him read in the shabby little town hall when I was a student. My friend Henry Bates, the Shoemaker, asked me to go with him to hear the new poet. There were not above five and twenty persons present. I had heard nothing of Riley and had no high expectations as to what I should hear. Never was a more overwhelming and joyful surprise—'The Object Lesson,' 'The Bear Story,' and many more. A few years later we paid Mr. Riley five hundred dollars for essentially the same program. He was then already an artist on the stage as truly as was Joe Jefferson."

Near the end of 1879 the "Bret Harte of Indiana" first advanced across the state line, and with that venture he discovered his inability to board the right train; reach his destination on time. "I don't remember places," he once remarked: "Hold on, I *do* remember *one* town, Rockville, Indiana,—and a tall, gaunt, flickering figure in the hallway. The figure had not come to tell me how I had played upon the heartstrings of my hearers. He came in the name of

George C. Hitt, Publisher of the Poet's First Book

SENATOR HARRY S. NEW

From a photograph taken while an officer in the Spanish-American War

the *law* to levy on my door receipts for some fancied claim of five dollars."

A week before the New Year, he made his bow to Illinois, "went over," as he said, "to impart an intellectual stimulus to the little town of Galva." Posters announced him as "John C. Walker," author of "Romancin'" and "Tom Johnson's Quit." Before making the hazardous journey he wrote Howard S. Taylor, then a resident of the place, asking for particulars, when and how to start to Galva, "because," he said, "I am as blind as a bat on railroads. And right here let me tell you, get your umbrella. I never fail to bring a storm of some kind. I am a surer thing on rain than the tree-toad."

Taylor knew the poet had no instinct for locality, and was therefore explicit. "Route and the time as follows—Fare ten dollars—change cars at Peoria—(*a*) Ask editor the *Journal* for a pass to Peoria—(*b*) Get on the I. B. & W. train at Indianapolis at eleven o'clock at night; take a chair and nap until about nine next morning, when your eyes will open in Peoria—(*c*) Get out at the depot and do not forget your satchel—(*d*) Buy a ticket to Galva—(*e*) Board the Peoria and Rock Island train—(*f*) Paste this in your hat lest you lose it and turn up in Pekin or somewhere else—(*g*) Have thou nothing to do with the peanut man or strangers on the road—(*h*) Wire me when you reach Peoria as the women want to crimp their hair."

Some of his friends envied the poet as he went from town to town tasting the sweets of fame. "It was not so dismal," he wrote one of them later, "when I had to wait for trains in the daylight. I could go

round to the music stores, take down a violin and tune it, and bring back across the years the sound of old melodies. But it was grinning a ghastly smile when I had to wait at night, or travel between county seats, on muddy roads, in a buggy. I recall a dreary midnight at a little station down on the Old Jeff. Road. It was a raw cheerless night. The utter darkness of everything on the outside gave to the stranger a sense of blank desolation. Inside the waiting-room a boisterous fire was pulsing in a 'torpedo' stove which stood ankle-deep in a box of sawdust filled with cigar stubs and refuse tobacco. Outside the operator's window the signal lantern was buffeted by the vindictive wind. Telegraph wires snored and snarled on the pole at the corner of the station. The lonely ticking of the instrument in the office was unbearable. It was a relief when a wild freight train went jarring by and I stood on the rainy platform and watched the red light of the caboose as it burned itself to ashes and was lost in the black embers of the night. About that time the Old Man of the Sea came along, making signs to me to carry him off on my back. No agent to tell you the train was four hours late. Wait there in those grim, hysterical conditions till three o'clock in the morning as I did, and perhaps it will not seem so unclassical in a poet to uncork a calabash, take a few potations and climb on the train three sheets in the wind."

The lecture season of 1880-'81 brought such additions to Riley's program as "Little Tommy Smith" and "The Champion Checker Player of Ameriky." It opened auspiciously one Tuesday evening at Dickson's

Grand Opera House, Indianapolis. Later in the season he made a rather extended tour through Northern Indiana, a tour that required for the first time, something a little larger than a satchel, a little smaller than a trunk. Baggage men called it a telescope. "In those bygone days," said Riley, "I was showing in towns which can now be found only on county maps. I had a varied experience in school halls and skating rinks, and something to remember about country hotels. My first engagement was at Cambridge City. Having a vague impression that Cambridge and Dublin were twin towns, I got off at Dublin. I arrived just after the noon hour. The little sleepy village was taking its siesta. The hotel keeper's boy was at the station with a spring wagon, into which he loaded my telescope with other baggage and drove away. When I reached the hotel I found the baggage on the front porch and the landlord leaning back in an easy chair smoking a corn-cob pipe. I thought the hour had arrived for the lecturer on "Poetry and Character" to show a few signs of travel experience. I entered the office and a girl came out of the dining-room to show me where to register. Returning to the porch I said, 'That telescope you see right over there is mine.'

" 'All right,' says the landlord.

" 'I want it taken to my room.'

" 'All right,' repeated the landlord.

" 'How soon may I have it?'

" 'Well, the boy's puttin' the horse up jest now, but soon as he gits back, he'll he'p you carry it up.' "

Thus Riley began what he called a tour of the "re-

mote provinces," swinging round the arc to the Tippecanoe Battle Ground, where the tour ended "in a little hall over a country store."

Returning to the *Journal* office—the Alpha and Omega of those lecture wanderings—Riley found the "reportorial band" as eager as ever to welcome him, and on that particular day, the droll Myron Reed was among them. "A fugacious tour," said Reed. "Have you any home folks?" asked a reporter. "Know anything about your ancestors?" added Reed. "Or the size of gate receipts by moonlight?" continued the reporter. "Where did you come from?" all asked at once.

"From the Battle Ground," returned Riley. "Big fight! Didn't see Tecumseh. He was away on a little tour of his own. The Prophet was there though, back in the rear, you know, where the generals always are while the fight is on. A farmer saved my telescope—brought it and its celebrated owner to the train in a buckboard."

The lecture year he had just begun was far more prosperous than the preceding ones. Return engagements were the rule, Crawfordsville and Terre Haute demanding "three readings in one season." With all this he did not neglect his *Journal* duties. Writing Roselind E. Jones, he said, "I am crowded to the raw edge of distraction, and, if I don't die soon, am certainly in for a hard fall and winter. You see, I *lecture* in the winter season, and if you can just imagine a leetle, weenty-teenty man, with no more dignity than I possess, trying to appear serious before 'applausive thousands,' you can perhaps arrive at some conclusion

of the amount of preparation necessary in the production of such a program. And that program I am now engaged upon, and slashing away at the swarms of other duties like a small boy in an adult hornet's nest."

CHAPTER VI

LITERARY DENS

THE Hoosier Poet was a dreamer. Many thick-coming fancies "broke upon the idle seashore of his mind—dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." Sometimes those dreams were as full of fate as his songs were full of melody. Again they were visionary; at least they were so regarded by the god of this world. "If I had as much money as Carnegie," he once remarked, "I would restore the homes of great artists and poets. I would build the Anne Hathaway Cottage on a lake somewhere in Wisconsin, the Longfellow Homestead in Indiana, the Whittier Birthplace in some other state. Interesting indeed a great park would be if it contained the homes and literary dens of eminent authors—Abbotsford, and the majesty of Tennyson's estate at Farringford, and so on."

Should any multi-millionaire of the future desire to restore the Riley literary dens, he would quite soon discover his attempt to be a sleeveless errand. Throughout his "Prolific Decade" and years before and after it, Riley had no fixed place of abode. Being a literary Bedouin, his study was where he pitched his tent—a solitary place if he could find it. "I hope it will be made clear to posterity," he said, "that I want to be let alone. One must have a nest in which his literary fledglings may grow feet and wings—

Mary Anderson a dramatic den, and Uncle Remus his mocking-bird's nest."

In the first years of his literary ventures, Riley had a desk in his paint shop over a drug store in Greenfield. He also occupied an old superstitious room in the Dunbar House.

Another Greenfield den is recalled by the poet's early friend, A. W. Macy, first publisher of the poem, "Fame." "I found Riley in a dingy little law-office at the top of a rickety stairway," said the friend. "The office furniture consisted of an ancient roll-top desk, two feeble-minded chairs, and a window-shade that served as a sieve for the sunshine. A few empty law books reposed at various angles on top of the desk. Within easy reach was a good supply of scratch paper and a sharp-pointed pencil. With the rosy enthusiasm and the abounding hopefulness of youth, we plunged into our old-time favorite subjects, language and literature—he doing most of the talking. Forgotten were our sordid surroundings. We were in a palace with fine, rare spirits all about us. Some wonderful castles were erected that afternoon, and not all of them, as it proved, were made of air." And a wonderful poem, "An Old Sweetheart of Mine," Macy might have added, first saw the light in that law-office.

In Indianapolis, prior to his moving permanently into Lockerbie Street, Riley occupied rooms in boarding-houses and old hotels.

There were three workshops however, which were in a class to themselves. In these the poet accomplished wonders, wrote almost all the poems and stories that brought him distinction on the Indianapolis *Journal* and the weekly papers. First and

most interesting as well as the most gruesome, was "The Morgue," on the shady side of Main Street, Greenfield—now, strange to relate, occupied by an undertaker. Its name was accidental. Writing Riley concerning the "Whittleford Letters," from her literary den ("Castle Thunder") Mrs. Catherwood informed him that the Muse had deserted her. Her ship was becalmed—nothing left but just the dull pressure of inertia. Riley's reply was equally despondent; day and night tears had been his food:

The Morgue, May 22, 1879.

Dear Mither:

The cold and pulseless fact remains unalterable. Think of it! I'm in debt to every living human being within range—penniless in a manner, "warned out" to work the roads, and yet in one week's time have been compelled by a pitiless state of affairs (I won't lay it on Providence this time) to forego four separate and distinct engagements that would put money in my purse. And now what's a fellow to do? Echo howls, "To do!"—and that's about the *sighs* of it. I can only writhe in prayer. Don't think any one does me injustice in not rewarding my labors with a more lavish hand. That's not it. It's—but I can't swear or I'd tell you; but I do hope this letter will find you in a more patient frame of mind than is now the eclipsed dower of

Yours, Fate & Co.,

J. W. RILEY.

P.S. And my mortal mind engages
That no Spider on the pages
Of the history of ages
Ever smole as grim a smile!

At the time, Riley was receiving letters from a

friend in Illinois, who called his place of banishment, "Patmos," and who would have Indiana writers know that others were denied the pleasures of society. In derision Riley called *his* palace of seclusion, "The Morgue"—at first just the temporary play of fancy, but later retained for general use. Often he wrote from "The Morgue" as if he were a creature of comfort living in clover. Again Fate compelled him to summon the solemn midnight to do its work of woe.

The second of the three workshops was Room 22 of the old Vinton Block, corner of Pennsylvania and Market Streets, Indianapolis. To this he repaired soon after beginning work on the *Journal*, "first," he said, "because it was near the '*Journal* Works,' and second, because the rent was only five dollars a month." After occupying it for a while he began to call it the "Hut of Refuge," the "old rookery" becoming in time a gathering spot for played-out actors, "those coyotes and wildcats of the night," said Riley, "who escape their own loneliness by afflicting others with their company." They were interesting for a while but by and by became a nuisance. "It's a perilously thin veil," he remarked, "between being good company and a bore."

There came times when the mandates of the Muse were imperial. The poet was called to his task, as Thoreau phrases it, by the winds of heaven and his good genius, as truly as the preacher was called to preach. At such times callers were barred from the "Refuge," there being admission to no one, save the poet's physician, "whose footfall," Riley said, "I would know if I heard it on the grass above my grave."

Importunate visitors had to trust to the chance of ambushing the poet at the side door of the *Journal* office. The "Refuge" was inaccessible:

> "The door was locked and the key
> Was safely hid in a hollow tree."

There were employees on the *Journal,* who had not the vaguest idea of that den in the Vinton Block. It pleased Riley to veil it in mystery, something like the Wemmick of fiction, who at the close of the day retired to his little wooden cottage with the narrow chasm around it; as much as to say, When I go to the office I leave my den behind me, and when I go to my den I leave my office behind me. At night, as Wemmick did, Riley hoisted the bridge that crossed the chasm and thus cut off communication.

The literary name of the "Refuge" was the "Dead Rose,"—*sub rosa,* behind the scenes, in a whisper, secrecy, silence. It pleased Riley to say *dead* silence —the "Dead Rose." In the palmy days of the Metropolitan Theater, the old Vinton rooms had been occupied by a theatrical troupe. The "Dead Rose" was hung with theatrical trophies. There were lithographs of famous actors on the walls. He did not remove them, made no change except to place a little terra cotta bust of Dickens on a dusty bracket above his table. His physician, Doctor Franklin W. Hays, who shared the room with him at sundry times, thought the poet should have beside Dickens a bust of Harpocrates, the god of silence and prophetic dreams. "Back to Gad's Hill," said Riley, "is far enough—no ancient memorials." Late at night the lithographs beamed "softly on the poet with warm surprise." As

he stared at them dreamily he was carried back to his own dramatic days and his success in *The Chimney Corner*. *Journal* reporters remembered his reproducing the dying figure of Grandfather Whitehead with telling effect.

A third workshop was the "Crow's Nest," a little square room under the cupola of the Seminary Homestead, Greenfield, the quaint old structure in which the poet's father lived after his second marriage. Those were palmy days for the poet, up near the cupola—

"Wretched was he sometimes,
Pinched and harassed with vain desires;
But thicker than clover sprung the rhymes
As he dwelt like a sparrow among the spires."

The name, "Crow's Nest," had been suggested by the box or perch of that name in the top rigging of Greenland galleys, built for the man on the lookout for whales. The room was fitted up soon after the poet moved to Indianapolis and for years was a retreat when he sought refuge from the torture of the city. "Going to Greenfield to look out for whales," he would say to his physician, meaning his purpose to lodge in the "Crow's Nest" and keep a sharp eye out for "a tall, majestic poem."

One night in December he wrote a few lines about the "Nest":

"A little, dingy, dusty room,
As close and musty as a tomb,
With one blank window curtained o'er
With dust and dirt and nothing more,
Where round the outer side the day
Hangs vagrant-like, and skulks away,

And leaves the crescent moon in vain
Tiptoeing at the topmost pane.
A room, like some deserted nest,
High-clinging underneath the eaves,
Where winter winds are surliest,
And where the Old Year, dying, weaves
The first fold of his snowy shroud
And wraps it round him like a cloud."

Within the "deserted nest" is a lonely lamp—"a feeble, sallow, sickly, weird and ghastly flame" of diluted light

"Upon the pallid, upturned face
Of one—the genius of the place—
Whose duty is to write and write,
Nor rest him either day or night;
Whose duty is to write, erase,
And write again, and underscore,
Review his work, and cull it o'er,
And write again, and pause, efface,
And scratch his head for something more
To write about, until, as now,
His pen is idle as a vow."

Suggestions along the way pointed to the importance of seclusion. One came from Mark Twain, a scrap of advice to young writers, which Riley clipped from a newspaper. A writer, according to Twain, should work three months on a stretch, dead to everything but his work; then loaf diligently three months and go at it again. Solitary imprisonment by compulsion was the one perfect condition for perfect performance. No letters, no telegrams, no bores, no responsibilities, no gadding about, no seductive pleasures beckoning one way and dividing his mind.

Riley listened kindly to Twain, but soon learned by experience that he could not work by rule. Not three months at a stretch but about three weeks was his limit. "There is my old friend, Dickens," Riley would say, "breakfasting at eight o'clock, after breakfast, answering letters, then writing until one o'clock, then lunch, then walk twelve miles, then dine at six, and pass the evening with friends; next day, same program; I don't see how he did it."

An occasion for surprise and sometimes concern among friends was the poet's going so long in his den without refreshments. He would steal away from the "Dead Rose" at night to the alley restaurant—the patch of light in the gloom back of the *Journal* Building—and no one would see him till he came again for his lunch the next midnight. A few night owls only knew where to find him. "In Greenfield," said the poet, "I emerged from 'The Morgue' after midnight to babble with the brook that curled through the town, or, when so inclined, I wormed my way to the Brandywine woods, where the whippoorwills paused in their call, and the katydids hid away from the smile of the moon. In the daytime I sometimes walked forth when there was no outdoor gaiety provided but the lazy drizzle of the rain. I had a hunger, but it was not hunger for bread."

Only those who peeped behind the curtain knew when Riley partook of food. His habit of secrecy, according to Greenfield companions, was a subject for daily inquiry. "The poet was a kind of caliph," said one; "he dwelt apart; he did not promote explanations. 'The Morgue' concealed him from the prying eyes of public curiosity. Sometimes we would ask him to

walk with us. 'No time,' he would reply; 'have to stay here and sew my shroud,' whatever that meant. 'If they ask you anything about me, tell them you don't know.' Daily he was summoned to his task—and believe me, he *worked.* Often he wrote till daylight, wrote till his fingers were like ice and his brow like fire. There was no yardstick for his enthusiasm when hinged to a poem. His young existence leaped like a hillside torrent. Talk about his lack of resolution! When he was anchored to his table you could no more move him than you could move a mountain."

Yet the poet longed for friendship as seen in his plaint to H. S. Taylor:

The Morgue, September 4, 1879.

Dear Taylor:

There's been a two-weeks' kink in my usually prolific fancy and I can't get past it. Wish I could see you and get lulled again. Tell you what I need—genial companionship. But I am clearly out of gunshot of it here. It is getting awful. People all stop talking as I pass along the street and stare at me like a "sum" in compound interest. Can't get me fixed—nor I them, but it is just naturally pulling me down and shutting me up like a Chinese lantern, or a concertina, that's better, and squeezing all the music out of me. I have been trying to rest, but do not believe I am doing it. Write soon and let me know all you are dreaming and doing for the future.

Your friend,

J. W. R.

"A man with imagination," said Riley, recalling his experience in desolate rooms, "can be supremely happy behind the bars of a jail. Leigh Hunt was such a

man. Indeed a sparsely furnished room is preferable. I remember watching Kipling write one day in New York. I found him at work at a little table. His room was rather mean-looking. He was drawing a picture of a ship on a piece of blotting paper. He was just like an overgrown boy. That is the way he worked—one minute playing, the next, writing lines that smacked of genius."

A correspondent to the *Yankee Blade* was certain Tennyson could write a good poem on a pine table in the kitchen, and that Whitcomb Riley could write one on the cars. This was a guess, yet it was true that Riley had written poetry on the train between Indianapolis and Greenfield, so that friends referred to the Pennsylvania Accommodation as one of his literary dens. Frequently he warned the brakeman to set him off at Greenfield. Writing thus irregularly on trains led some critics to account, as they thought, for imperfections in his verse. It was really not his way to write so much, as to think out poems on trains or while walking the streets. When the time came, whether it rained, snowed or shone, he recorded them regardless of surroundings—at an office desk in the hum of business, in the waiting-room of a station, on the corner of an editor's table, or seated on a bench with a writing pad on his knee—it was all the same to him. Often he was insensible to surroundings.

There is a glimpse of Riley in his Greenfield den, his "old catafalque," as he termed it, in his "Tale of a Spider," the story which was begun in "The Morgue" and finished in the "Dead Rose." He seems to have feasted and fattened on the gloom. "The greater por-

tion of my time," he writes, "I occupy in strict seclusion, here at my desk—for only when alone can I conscientiously indulge certain propensities of thinking aloud, talking to myself, leaping from my chair occasionally to dance a new thought round the room, or to take it in my arms, and hug and love it as I would a great fat, laughing baby with a bunch of jingling keys.

"Then there are times too when worn with work, and I find my pen dabbling by the wayside in sluggish blots of ink, that I delight to take up the old guitar which leans here in the corner, and twang among the waltzes that I used to know, or lift a most unlovely voice in half-forgotten songs whose withered notes of melody fall on me like dead leaves, but whose crisp rustling still has power to waken from 'the dusty crypt of darkened forms and faces' the glad convivial spirits that once thronged about me in my wayward past, and made my young life one long peal of empty merriment."

"Hope you will like this piece of metrical abandon," Riley would remark or write to friends; "just copied it from first draft. It swept through 'The Morgue' last night as I sat coaxing Fate for something sorrowful. Rare old jade! She knows best what we need. God bless her!"

Years after his gloom in it, Riley left a memory of "The Morgue," a weird, unaccountable effusion (quoted in part), in which he feigns himself a madman vibrating between deterioration and transports of insanity; soothed on the one hand by friends and visions of light, and on the other, welcoming the joy and delirium of destruction—

"Your letter was almost as dear to me
As my lost mother used to be!"—
(This is the way he wrote—and died
Not understanding but satisfied.)

"Day by day from the window here
I stare out where the June is drear,
Out where the leaves on the gladdest trees
Are only trembling with agonies.

"And all is rainy in spite of the sun;
But the uppermost ache of my life is done,
And I am as glad as a moth that flies
Into a great white flame and dies."

In the main, however, the warmth of his heart enabled the poet to hallow his misfortune as Leigh Hunt had done in the jail. As he sang afterward in "A Poor Man's Wealth," he had "the opulence of poverty." What a "wealth of silence and hope, of ideals unrealized and energies as yet unillumined," he wrote in a fragment one midnight:

"What poverty like this! to laugh and sing,
And babble like a brook in summertime—
To circle round the world on airy wing,
Or clamber into heaven on rounds of rhyme,
When in the soul benignly lingering,
There lives a love unspeakably sublime."

The sorrowful was not the rule, although "The Morgue" was dismal. Usually he coaxed the *joyous* from Fate—exquisite music, the fruit of "an inward light that smote the eyes of his soul." Glad was the poet—and the night knew why.

Since Riley was a poet, a human, Cupid stole into his literary dens. The little god had a way of shoot-

ing arrows to lady artists and writers of other states. One of his arrows reached Ella Wheeler (since famously loved as Eller Wheeler Wilcox). She had been cheered to the echo by an immense throng in Madison, Wisconsin, where she had read a poem at the reunion of the Army of the Tennessee. Generals Sheridan and Sherman had listened to it, both had heartily participated in the demonstration, and the latter had praised the country girl for writing it. Each year after reading the account of her literary début, Riley became more interested in her. In February, 1880, he began a correspondence. "For years," he wrote, "I have been wanting to find you that I might tell you how much I like your writings—both prose and verse. I remember an odd sketch of yours, which warmed me through and through with delight. I read it to my literary friends, till we all in fancy gathered you in and made you one of us. Your poems I like best of all you do, and I am writing now to thank you for them, and for all the great good you are doing for the world—for everybody loves you, and God I know will make you very glad."

Replying in May from her literary den, Miss Wheeler was not certain that she had the gift of song. "If I have," she wrote, "I am chosen of the gods, even as you are, and we go with them—you and I—up into the mountain tops and down into the deep valleys. I thank Heaven every time I suffer and I bow my head with reverence every time I am joyous, because I know what it all means. My thankfulness is unutterable. I take all that is sent me, knowing nothing can come to me that is not sent by my friends, the gods, who know me and love me as their own."

In June Riley was with Myron Reed on a hunting trip in Wisconsin and one day called on Miss Wheeler in Milwaukee. The call was a disappointment, particularly to Miss Wheeler. On his return to Indianapolis, he promptly wrote her from the "Dead Rose." "I am here," the letter began, "at my desk in my old room. What is it that thrills me more—in this blank glare of day with all the air choked up with dust and heat, and no green thing in sight—but just the sullen face that glares back at me from the broken toilet glass bungled away here in the corner of my room. Wish I could shut off this thinking business for a while. I shut you clean away from me last night—I would not let you even look over my shoulder as I wrote —and wrote—and wrote. It was a long poem for me to write, because of late I have been writing just the shortest things; and this is over two hundred lines in length—but she has the blood in her, in every syllable."

The long poem was the "South Wind and the Sun," which, after a "process of refinement and purification," and the elimination of three stanzas, he published the next year in the *Journal*. Eminent authors agree with him, that it has blood in every syllable.

In July, after spending two weeks in Greenfield, he wrote Miss Wheeler again. "I have been endeavoring," he said, "to convince myself that old scenes, and all that flummery was happiness; but it would not work. I browsed industriously and dipped in old affairs that used to thrill, and raked away among the embers of old loves—not many, still enough to pluralize—but it was ghastly business at the best, and not one wounded sunbeam of pure joy to comfort me for all my pains. Fact is, the happy past (old love-

affairs) is just a juiceless pulp. I am back here now in the city, thank God, where work holds out to me wide-open arms, and welcomes me, and wants me all the time."

Then followed a copy from the first draft of his loved poem, "A Life-Lesson," which soon took its place in the *Journal.* Its plaintive line, "There! little girl, don't cry!"—the *thread of gold* the Muse had saved for the poem—was his own remark to a little girl who had broken her doll on the stone steps of a residence in Anderson.

In another letter the poet hungered for woman's companionship. He was brimmed with an alpine resolution, and the blazing desire to make his purpose an accomplished fact. "I am mad and famished," he wrote. "It all seems so strange. I have such brief interludes in which to be my real self—or selves. I work so like a steel automaton; tireless, uncompromising, cold, but with such a sure-and-certain sort of crank at every step, that if I don't just break and fly to pieces some day—I am certain of success, that's all."

Later there were hints in Miss Wheeler's letters of the "waning strength of her regard." She set Riley speculating as to the cause. Love seemed to be "a fickle thing. Then envelopes began to reach me," said he, "with blue steam escaping from the unsoldered corners of the lapels. Soon my visions of matrimony vanished like chickens when the mother hen sees a hawk's shadow—and I resolved to die unmarried, unwept and unsung."

Miss Wheeler had grave fears that she would not survive an unhappy marriage. The marriage of two poets would be unhappy. The Brownings had been

happy, but the list was altogether too small for sweet anticipations. "My first and only encounter with the Hoosier Poet," she said years after meeting him, "was like that of a canine and a feline. Mr. Riley barked in a way which caused my feline back to rise, and instead of calling him by his given name I hissed. I wore a new gown, a fashionable dress, and my hair was arranged in the fashion of the day. He began at once to criticize, and was much disappointed in my 'frivolous appearance.' I praised dancing. He thought poets should be above such things. My first sight of him shocked me. He was very blond—and very ugly. I was never attracted to blond men. His whole personality was most disappointing. After his return to Indianapolis, we continued to correspond for a while, but at last he wrote two disagreeable letters, and I promptly returned his with the request that he return mine. I made it clear that I did not want posterity to know that I had wasted so much time on an impossible person."

Prior to Riley's correspondence with Miss Wheeler, Cupid had penetrated the obscurity of "The Morgue" —not an enchanting scene surely; nevertheless the mischievous son of Venus paid the retreat a visit. Miss Louise Bottsford, a young woman of Hoosier birth and training, had been sufficiently literary in her development to merit the attention of eastern publications. She also had been helpful to Riley in the revision of his verse. Like Riley, she had lived in childhood in a log cabin, and its walls had echoed the charms of many a fairy tale. There had been a struggle and poverty, and then sunshine and song had broken upon it. Three poems—"Shadowland," "Satisfied"

and "Darkness," had, in Riley's opinion, "richly merited the wide circulation they attained." There was a warmth of simplicity in them which he prized, and "a dashing flow of merriment and quaint humor in her prose."

Thus a love and correspondence began, doomed to an unhappy ending, as were all his courtships. His "Golden Girl," the discerning reader will see, was a composite of many girls, who doubtless would have made him a lovely wife, had she ever existed, and it had been his fortune to meet her.

In after years Riley joked a great deal about his experience in the "Dead Rose." "Fortune," he once remarked, "stepped gingerly around the corner of Market Street, climbed the stairs, and emptied her cornucopia at my door. I smiled at the contents. The bust of Dickens laughed hilariously. And what do you suppose the cornucopia contained?—a bill for room rent nineteen days overdue—some worm candy—a bottle of Townsend's Magic Oil—a bachelor button—and the *thread of gold* for a poem, 'My First Spectacles.'"

In the city as in Greenfield, Riley continued his work in what the world terms uncongenial surroundings—and sometimes he thought they were uncongenial. "My poem, 'A Sleeping Beauty,'" he said, "was an inspiration. It was written in the grand old woods,—that is, in the grand old edge of the woods near the Starch Mills, where the atmosphere was so balmy the poet had to wear a muzzle to properly appreciate it. My limpid fancy tripped and trilled along as airily as Pogue's Run." After a two-weeks' illness, while recuperating in Greenfield, he wrote "Nothin' To Say"

one afternoon while sitting by an old hall table in the Seminary Homestead. Another time, he began writing "Little Orphant Annie" at the dinner table, and when the cook came to remove the cups and saucers and "brush the crumbs away," he climbed to the "Crow's Nest" and there finished what Time seems to be saying is the most popular poem for children ever written.

Within three years Riley wrote more than three hundred poems, most of them in the "Dead Rose" and "Crow's Nest"—such popular ones as "A Scrawl," "Away," "The Clover," "The Brook-Song," "Someday," "The Days Gone By" and "The Orchard Lands of Long Ago." Before he wrote these, there was one entitled "His Room," which, although written in "The Morgue," pertained particularly to the "Crow's Nest," except, he said, that there were no ivy leaves nor violets, nor any woven charms in the carpet. Home again from Hoosier lecture trips, from towns where he had stood "in festal halls a favored guest," his affection for the quietude of his den found expression in verse—

"Here I am happy, and would fain
Forget the world and all its woes;
So set me to my tasks again,
Old Room, and lull me to repose:
And as we glide adown the tide
Of dreams, forever side by side,
I'll hold your hands as lovers do
Their sweethearts' and talk love to you."

CHAPTER VII

WAITING FOR THE MORNING

IT was many a lonesome mile Whitcomb Riley traveled before he was admitted to the magazines, a long while before the papers emphasized his importance with two columns on the first page. In 1878 he began to send manuscripts to the *Atlantic*, but twenty years elapsed before he saw "The Sermon of the Rose," his first poem in that monthly. Although there were sleepless nights and "the drip and blur of tears," and sometimes a fierce defiance, and once, as he expressed it, "the instinctive desire to give battle in the savage way of the cave dwellers," yet in his calm moments he accepted all philosophically, and sometimes with fervid welcome, believing as he wrote in the poem, that "whatever befalls us is divinely meant." It was a long, long trail into the land of his Dreams, and yet what transport was his when the luring afterwhiles enveloped him with their smile—

"How sweet the sunlight on the garden wall,
And how sweet the sweet earth after the rain."

"He has seen the tearful words *respectfully declined*," said Myron Reed, "and I have grieved with him over those words in days when there was no flourish of trumpets. But finally, by way of *Wide-Awake*, *St. Nicholas*, and the backdoor bric-a-brac of the *Century*, he found himself inside."

Of a truth Riley had seen the rejection slip. He seldom heard the moan of a turtle dove without remarking, "Its tone is heartbreaking; it must have had a manuscript declined." For ten years, beginning with 1876, he was tenfold more familiar with "respectfully declined" than the desired "accepted"; and it was proof of his genius that he could play with the disheartening phrase and then smilingly toss it aside, as seen in one of his "Kickshaws" in the Kokomo *Tribune:*

"I asked my tailor for a suit;
I told him I designed
To pay him in a month or less—
He respectfully declined.

"I asked my love to the opera,
But beauty and song combined
Had not the power to tempt her—
She respectfully declined.

"I offered her my heart and hand,
I told her I would bind
The bargain with a cottage—
She respectfully declined.

"I sought relief in poetry
And felt somewhat resigned,
But the editor could not see it—
'Twas respectfully declined.

"He told me he had old machines
And low-priced boys to grind
Out better poems than he marked—
'Respectfully declined.'

"Oft in dreams I see the Devil
In a cloud of fire enshrined
As he grasps my card and marks it—
'Respectfully declined.'

"Then I wander till I reach the gate
Of Heaven (in my mind);
Saint Peter on my photo writes—
'Respectfully declined.'

"Saint Peter was an editor,
Leastwise he seemed to find
It very natural to write—
'Respectfully declined.'"

A young writer once came a long distance to consult Riley on the prospects of recognition. His manuscripts had been regularly returned and consequently he was "heartbroken," he said, "the most miserable wretch alive."

"How long have you been trying?" asked Riley.

"Three years," was the answer.

"My dear man," said Riley, "keep on trying; try as many years as I did."

"As *you* did!" exclaimed the young man; "*you* struggle for *years!*"

"Yes, sir, and I remember two years that were just protuberant with hopeless days. I had the longest face between Toronto and Tehauntepec. I tried one magazine twenty years—back came my poems eternally. I kept on. I will break into your *sanctum sanctorum,* I said, if I have to prorogue Parliament. I was not a believer in the theory that one man does his work easily because the gods favor him while another man has to shift, stumble and hobble along with-

out them. I had the conviction that continuous, unflagging persistence and determination win. If you are discouraged in three years it is not a hopeful sign."

At the end of twenty years Riley was testifying to the truth of what he wrote in "Wait," without knowing why he wrote it, back in those inglorious days in "The Morgue"—

"We know, O faltering heart,
Thy need is great:
But weary is the way that leads to art,
And all who journey there must bear their part—
Must bear their part, and—wait.

"And though with failing sight
You see the gate
Of Promise locked and barred, with swarthy Night
Guarding the golden keys of morning-light,—
Press bravely on—and wait."

While he berated the magazines and at times expressed his impatience in violent terms, Riley never held that poets were made for them. The reverse was the truth—the magazines for the poet. Subsequently a story was circulated that one of the standard magazines, seeing that Riley would one day be famous, had accepted one of his poems, paid ten dollars for it and kept it in a vault years before publishing it. The circumstances provoked Eugene Field to ask whether any American magazine had ever discovered a poet, and whether any magazine had ever taken up a worthy poet until his reputation had been established by the newspapers.

Field, according to Riley, had mistaken the province of the magazine. The newspapers had indeed estab-

lished Riley's reputation. But that was not enough. It was up to him to receive improvement from the magazines. He would therefore "whet his sickle and sail in." Perhaps a little more pruning was necessary. The magazines would know about that. For a long while he considered his relation to the magazine one of education. He was resolved not to be offended at honest criticism. "If you do not like my poem," he wrote an editor, "just say so. You can not hurt me by finding fault with it. If what you say does not agree with my opinion, I will keep the poem and love it just the same; and if your opinion is better, I shall not hesitate to cast mine overboard."

Scarcely had the curtain risen on his magazine ventures when he was confronted with the intolerance of one section of his country for another. Captain W. R. Myers is authority for an interesting "speech" on the subject, which Riley made one night under a tree in the Court House yard at Anderson, the gist of which was the words of the Psalmist: Promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. The public is the judge. It putteth down one and setteth up another. The poet's audience consisted of a few friends including the editors of the local papers. Standing at the back of a bench, in a nervous attitude, which soon gave place to one of deliberation and force, he spoke in substance as follows:

It is the prejudice of the editors against the West that forbids my name in the magazines, the offense of locality, which, widened to national proportions, will not only threaten the production of good literature, but the existence of our institutions, as just a few years ago it almost disrupted our Union. Music suffers

THE OLD JOURNAL BUILDING, NORTHEAST CORNER OF MARKET AND PENNSYLVANIA STREETS, INDIANAPOLIS

Cover Design for the Poet's First Book in Prose—"The Boss Girl"
Drawn by the poet with the assistance of Mr. Booth Tarkington

from this offense as well as literature. We are told that the drama simply does not exist west of New York City. Why deny the drama to a great center of population like Chicago? Whose fault is this? Perhaps our own. And this offense of locality is not confined to one section. We in the West are as provincial as they are in New England. Here are two big cities in our wide valley glaring at each other like leopards in a jungle. If St. Louis is for something, Chicago is against it. The newspapers of one section sniff against those of another. Right here at home an editor writes about the villainous mania and extravagant mouthings of its *esteemed* contemporary. This is not only bad manners, it is bad morals. This cleavage, these chronic animosities between communities and state should disappear. We will never achieve greatness by fostering the partisan and parochial spirit. It is un-American to overvalue ourselves and undervalue others. We destroy good in Indiana when we deprecate and antagonize good in Ohio. We should *visit* each other as they did in the days of brotherly love, those days of the backwoods. If a man lived twelve miles from a pioneer he was a neighbor. Right here within a half-mile range of the Court House are four thousand persons, but they are not neighbors. If we must have a Mason and Dixon Line running through this country, let it be an equatorial line with sunny climes and possibilities of merit and prosperity on each side of it. One hemisphere can not exist without the other. Man tries to think otherwise but on every hand Nature balks him. She shows by her care that differences are not differences after all, that all the zones are necessary—the frigid and the torrid, the temper-

ate and the intemperate. We journey far away to see crags and cataracts. Every day Nature reminds us that the journey is not only expensive but deceptive. Out here a mile from town the moonlight glorifies Kill Buck meadows with the same heavenly alchemy that she silvers a scene on the prairies or in the Rockies. The beauty of one place is the beauty of another. The good of each is the good of all. Our perpetuity as a country depends on our being indissolubly united. In communion there is strength. Let the literary folk of the North and the South, the East and the West, *know* one another and then they will *love* one another.

I don't know how far I have digressed from the main road, Riley concluded, but of one thing I am certain: When the people of this republic are linked to one another in *heart* as they are linked to one another in their *fortunes*, then, if not before, the poetry of the West will be popular in the East.

Riley began to court the favor of the magazines before moving to Indianapolis. One of his first letters was addressed to Charles Scribner's Sons:

Greenfield, Indiana, January 18, 1878.
Editor, Scribner's Monthly,
Dear Sir:

I address you with the faint hope that what I offer you may be an acceptable contribution. Through the encouragement of immediate friends and the daily press, I have been devoting my attention to the study of Poetry. I enclose specimens and a manuscript for your inspection. If you find my work of sufficient merit I could wish no higher honor than to appear before the general public through the medium of your Magazine.

The poem "Dream" is my latest production if not my best, and should you find it worthy of publication I ask you to accept it at whatever price you deem proper.

Yours truly,
J. W. RILEY.

The "specimens," including "Fame," and "An Old Sweetheart," and the beautiful sonnet, "Sun and Rain," were "respectfully declined," an instance of indifference to gold values, said Myron Reed, which had no basis for pardon in this world or the next. Part of the sonnet the reader shall have here as a sample of the poet's art at the beginning of his magazine ventures:

"All day the sun and rain have been as friends,
Each vying with the other which shall be
Most generous in dowering earth and sea
With their glad wealth, till each, as it descends,
Is mingled with the other, where it blends
In one warm, glimmering mist that falls on me
As once God's smile fell over Galilee."

A more persistent effort for eastern recognition was Riley's experience with the New York *Sun*. It grew out of his belief that the newspapers had in their keeping the making of a poet's fame. "I began writing with some ambition about ten years ago," he said in 1888. "My experience is that writing poetry is not an encouraging occupation. Among distinguished men who encouraged me to persevere was Charles A. Dana."

It was a great deal to have the encouragement of the ablest editor then living. Not always, according

to Riley, were Dana's opinions reasonable. As was said, "they were sometimes appalling in their rantankerous nullification of all the doctrines approved by the common sense. But Dana's manner of expressing them was perfect, the absolute reflection of his mood." Riley saw what others saw, that the editor was an unusual man for liking and hating. Dana "had his gods and his devils among men, and they were not always selected according to common rules." In a word, Riley loved him because he made his vast information useful "down in the arena of every-day life." The editor sympathized with failure for he himself had once failed conspicuously. He knew also that the cultivated man is not *always* the best man. He once told Riley of a reporter who could not spell four words correctly —but who got the facts, who saw vividly the picturesque, the interesting, the important aspect of things. He did his work so well that it was worth the time and attention of a man who had knowledge of grammar and spelling to rewrite the report.

Here indeed, in Dana, was brotherly assistance for a man in need, toleration of a poet who lacked the attainments of the schools. Riley was a poor speller, and often his verb did not agree with the subject.

When Riley began sending poems to the *Sun* in 1880, Dana wrote him plainly that his poems lacked dignity, the poet did himself great injustice by indulging so many whimsicalities, when he had within him so much of real worth. Riley should quit the surface and dig for gold. "I was too profoundly impressed with my literary attainments," said Riley. "I sent Dana blooming, wildwood verse. He pruned it

and at first the pruning hurt, but afterward I saw the benefit. Dana brought me out of the tall timber."

The eminent editor was certain that many authors had been puffed into oblivion by too much praise. "If the young writer sets out with the conceit that he is a prodigy," he wrote, "his wreck and ruin are inevitable." Riley was grateful for the warning; said it "kept him from crowing on the gatepost."

"When the news of my success in the *Sun* came rippling over the Alleghanies," said the poet, "I blushed like a girl." Dana's first note was dated

New York, March 30, 1880.

The editor of the *Sun* presents his compliments to Mr. J. W. Riley and proposes to publish his little poem entitled "Silence" at an early day. The *Sun* will always be very glad to hear from Mr. Riley.

Writing from the *Sun* office, May 17, 1880, Dana said, "There is a great deal of talent in your poems, and I have no doubt that your efforts will finally bring you the solid success which alone is worth working for. The two small poems we propose to publish, and I enclose a check for them and the other pieces which have already appeared in the *Sun*. 'The Wandering Jew' I return. It lacks both originality of imagination and finish of execution. 'Tom Johnson's Quit' I do not like at all. It has the radical defect of attempting to joke with a shocking subject."

This was scorching, as was also a letter a fortnight before, in which the editor was "sorry" he did not like the poem. "It is not healthy," he said. "Why add to the morbid poetry of the world?" Riley had been

told that Dana could "make things warm" for folks when he took a notion. Evidently the editor was not selecting poems according to the rules of weekly papers. Riley replied as follows:

Mr. Charles A. Dana—
Dear Sir:

Although surprised to have my two poems pronounced morbid and unhealthful, I am none the less grateful for the opinion you express. I admit that ofttimes in the selection of themes, I seem unfortunate, but I assure you that my efforts are always directed against any unhealthful tone, or touch of morbidness. Hereafter I will be still more guarded. I incline naturally I think to odd studies, and in that peculiar field I am now laboring with unusual industry. There is a demand for such work from the western papers, a demand sufficient to assist me somewhat on a rather rugged path. I am a young man but in earnest and must succeed, since I have been virtually assured by others that the evidence of good is in me and I must develop it.

Again and again I thank you for your kindly acceptance of such pieces of mine as you found deserving, and hope that you may often pick from those I send you something of real worth.

I am as ever, J. W. RILEY.

As Dana grew more helpful Riley was emboldened to seek advice on the "Flying Islands" which had been between the hammer and the anvil in the West. How would it fare in the East? Accordingly the following letter:

Charles A. Dana, Esq.,
Dear Sir:

Something over a year ago I published in one of our local papers the enclosed poetical extravaganza,

intending as soon as favorable circumstances permitted to offer it to some good publisher. I have every reason to believe that the performance is strictly and strikingly original, and although with scarcely a hope that you may have any leisure to devote to an examination of it, I would value highly your opinion regarding it. I am wholly uninformed regarding the measures of procedure for publication in book form, and as I have no friends here versed in such matters, I apply to you in my extremity. I can furnish, if required, references from the best known men of my state, as to worth of character, industry, and local literary standing. The work, as you may readily perceive, is not an ambitious one—but merely intended to make an odd and pleasant volume for the Holidays —so cast and treated as to afford the artist as well as author the best possible chance to air his erratic fancies and conceits. If you have no time to bestow upon my desires, I shall not be disappointed.

Most truly yours,

J. W. RILEY.

The Sun, New York, June, 1880.

Dear Mr. Riley:

I have read your poem with attention. My advice to you is not to publish it. Twenty years hence, fortune favoring you, you may make a poem of this kind which will possess the necessary quality; but this one seems to me much too young. As for talent it has plenty of it; and yet it is unripe. Its wit is often faulty, its idea imperfectly worked out and its taste in some instances the reverse of poetical.

Yours very truly,

CHARLES A. DANA.

About the same time there was a visitation from the poet's home district. An exchange was finding it monotonous to notice his nonsense. There should be

a law against it. "He is so prolific," said the local critic, "that it is difficult to keep up with him. He breaks out here and there and everywhere, and evidently has the rhyming mania in its most virulent stage. The wonder is not so much that he rhymes—he can not help that—but that reputable newspapers will publish the twaddle. He can hardly pay for it at so much a line, and yet we can not for the life of us see how he can get his verses into the New York *Sun* on any other conditions."

Newspaper abuse seldom pushed the poet into a corner. His relative, Judge Hough of Greenfield, said that he stood fire with the *sang-froid* of his grandmother, Margaret Riley, whose composure was the talk of pioneer neighborhoods. Riley "embalmed the local criticism," as he said, and dismissed it from thought. But he was grateful to the *Sun:*

Charles A. Dana, Esq.
Dear Sir:

I ask you to accept my warmest thanks for your kindness, and good advice regarding "The Flying Islands." I feel that I owe you more than mere gratitude of written words, and shall hope that some rare future will bring me within reach of your friendly hand, that I may thank you as I most desire.

As ever gratefully,
J. W. Riley.

Knowing the value of Dana's criticism Riley advised others to seek it. "The *Sun* is good pay," he wrote a friend, "and I wedge a poem in there every once-in-a-while. Don't be discouraged if at first refused. Four poems have come back to me in succession. But let me suggest that when you offer the *Sun* anything,

let it be thoroughly wholesome, warm and cheery; as Bob Ingersoll would say,—'full of splendid humanity.'"

In 1879 when Mary H. Catherwood and Riley were "playing literature" in the "Whittleford Letters," she congratulated him on the steady realization of his dream, was thankful that she had been permitted to see the day when the Little Town o' Tailholt was neither "big enough, show enough, wide enough, handy enough, nor good enough" for the poet; that, after all, he was finding railroads, factories, theaters, graded streets, crowds and church steeples good company. A magazine failure had brought her "pecuniary distress." She could not get "the ghost of a laugh out of it." But what joy it was to know that Riley did not have "to write for bread and coffee; that he could drift off into the woods and sing delicious songs without having to calculate in the midst of his poetic passion when they would probably be most available, and how much they would bring."

The contrary was the truth. Years passed and still poems did not pay for "bread and coffee." To Riley it was a source of mortification that he reached his thirty-third birthday without magazine recognition. He warned his co-workers on the *Journal,* when they reminded him of the milestones in his career, that they did so at their peril. "When youth is melting away," he complained, "the period in which a poet can alone achieve anything, the hours that wrap their dismal wings around him on his birthday are above all others the most dreadful and undesirable."

To his secretary Riley once remarked that he had grown football hair a long while before the maga-

zines caressed him. The yowl of critics had been as musical as the howl of the hounds to "Coon-dog Wess." Magazine weather, he went on smilingly, is March weather. 1st to the 5th, Snow-storms and squally—7th to 10th, Unusually high winds—11th to 15th, Freezing as far south as "An Old Sweetheart of Mine" —16th to 20th, Mild, soft weather—21st to 26th, Cloudy conditions with heavy rainfall on "Fame" and on "Silence"—27th to 31st, Slush and mud, with a violent tornado on the "Flying Islands." A trying season is the magazine season. It is full of unlucky days—and woe to the poet who is taken sick at that time, for he seldom recovers.

It is not just one or a score of disappointments that made his hope of success feeble. The days, if chained together, would make weeks and months. He longed for pecuniary as well as literary reward. "The old, independent, God-blessed sense of hope is strong upon me," he wrote a friend. "Perhaps I will be victor after all. Down on my knees the past week I have prayed for it. The utter loneliness and dearth and need of something assured for the future is the cause of all my many falterings and failures. When I try, yet never touch on the success of the material living which others seem to grasp and hold and have, why, then it is that I give up entirely, and for a time lose myself in the folly of forgetting. That is the curse that rests on me, and follows me and hounds me down. I would rather be the meanest man that carries mortar in a hod than be vexed this way with an ambition stout as Death, and a temperament as weak as water. If I only had a little store and sold prunes and rusty hooks and eyes, how much happier I would be, and how

much better it would be for all who yet hold me in their affection and esteem."

Commenting rather penitently at a later period on his despondency, Riley said, "My inspiring genius that week was not the bust of Dickens on the wall; it was a little crockery poodle on the floor."

A small circle in Indianapolis were wont to say among themselves and sometimes to his friends that magazines did not accept Riley's verse because it was not poetry—it lacked the training of the schools and so forth. One remarked, in rough vernacular, that "Riley should first get the hayseed out of his hair and the slumgullion off his boots before mixing in society." Myron Reed, hearing of the remark, one day in the *Journal* Informal Club when Riley was absent, made characteristic reply, admitting first that the Hoosier Poet would to a certain degree be benefited by polish. But the attempt of the magazines to put language in the place of spirit and feeling was playing Hamlet with Hamlet left out. Reed went on to say to the gentlemen that the verse-maker may pride himself on language; he may accumulate synonyms and rhymes; he may build line after line of alliteration, but the result is not poetry. Glittering rhetoric and word painting will not do. Such verse, though set between "peacock feathers and head and foot pieces of the choicest scrolling," is not poetry. Its glitter is not gold.

"The magazine editors are largely responsible for this," said he. "They themselves—some of them—are professional poets, but their artificial composition does not make a poem. It is chilly as an iceberg."

"It is a great mistake," added Reed warmly, "to

suppose that no American can write poetry unless he conforms to accepted standards and can command ten dollars a line. If I take up land that is absolutely worthless and make it yield potatoes, they are mine —in the name of my grandfather who marched with Montgomery to Quebec, I say they are mine—and I am entitled to reward for producing them. Whitcomb Riley found here in this Middle West a piece of worthless land. He made it yield poems, and I say the poems are his and the magazines should pay him for them."

Reed then read one of Riley's recent poems, "Shadow and Shine":

"Storms of winter, and deepening snows,
When will you end? I said,
For the soul within me was dumb with woes,
And my heart uncomforted.
When will you cease, O dismal days?
When will you set me free?
For the frozen world and its desolate ways
Are all unloved of me.

"I waited long but the answer came—
The kiss of the sunshine lay
Warm as a flame on the lips that frame
The song in my heart to-day.
Blossoms of summertime waved in the air
Glimmers of sun in the sea;
Fair thoughts followed me everywhere,
And the world was dear to me."

"The magazines have kept Riley waiting long enough," concluded Reed. "The poet who wrote that has seen the smile of the night and the dew and the blue of morning skies. He deserves recognition and remuneration."

Meanwhile scraps of encouragement reached the poet. "There is no fear for this man's fame," wrote the editor of the Boston *Pilot.* "The author of 'The Shower' will grow to be an American poet or we know nothing of the signs of genius."

Chief among those who encouraged him, in point of age, was the mother of Indiana verse, Mrs. Sarah T. Bolton.

> "Nothing great is lightly won,
> Nothing won is lost,"

she had said to Riley one day at a Pioneer Meeting—a sentiment from her popular poem, "Paddle Your Own Canoe." "I know what it means to wrest the wreath of fame from the hand of fate," she remarked at another time. She too had had to wait for the morning.

The poet's comments on the adverse conditions were truly Rileyesque. Addressing Ella Wheeler in his familiar way he wrote:

Dear Filigree:

> I once thought myself quite a poet,
> And wanting to prove it and show it,
> I humped up one shoulder
> And grabbed a penholder
> And sat down and wro-et and wro-et.

With your letter came one from the *Atlantic* returning the best poem I ever wrote. A good letter however, namby-pambying about the way and how, and regretting—Bah! how I hate that word. Now I shall send the poem to the *Harper's* and if they return it I shall frame it in gold and keep it for home use—

for no medium but the very loftiest shall ever give it to the world. With the *Atlantic* letter too came one from *St. Nicholas* accepting a contribution. Hurrah! —just as they all will jump to do some day, I swear! Now I am going to flounce down and give Messrs. old *Atlantic* a poem that will paralyze them, for I want them to see at least that I can write them as fast as they can send them back. I have dozens under way, and still buzzing like a hive."

The *Harper's* returned the poem, "Song of Yesterday," for good reasons as did the *Atlantic*—reasons which the poet himself discovered before he included it in *Rhymes of Childhood* a decade later. Radical changes were made in several stanzas. Had William Dean Howells, then editor of the *Atlantic*, read the improved lines, he doubtless would not have declined the poem.

A long list of magazine poems, covering a period of ten years, beginning in 1878, Riley labeled "Reveries of a Rhymer," but the reveries were melancholy when he saw the rejection slips. Other Indiana writers had manuscripts rejected, but they accepted their fate more philosophically. If there was moaning they kept it from the public. They did not divulge it in newspaper interviews as Riley did. What seemed a mountain to him was a hillock to them. Perhaps the thumping of fate was one of the numerous ways Nature had of mellowing his heart and making it impressible, keeping it sensitive to the million simple joys and sorrows around him.

Two or three magazines had a way of accepting a poem and then delaying its publication. One sent a check for ten dollars for a poem which it *never* pub-

lished. It was said the poem was laid away in a vault and forgotten. The *Century* received "Nothin' To Say" in 1883, but did not publish till August, 1887. A week after finishing it Riley wrote of it to B. S. Parker:

Indianapolis, June 10, 1883.

Dear Parker:

Just from Greenfield, where an hour ago I mailed you a copy of a bit of dialect, "Nothin' To Say." Now congratulate me, for here I find waiting a check from the *Century* magazine for same poem, and a letter accompanying it, and the return of a serious poem. And now I am going to double up this same serious poem and send it to *Harper's*, and if they return it, send it to the *Atlantic*, and if they return it, send it to *Lippincott's* and so forth and so forth. It is good and I know it, and if nobody on earth accepts it, I will just take it home to my arms and love it all myself.

As ever, J. W. RILEY.

Soon after his poems began to appear in standard magazines, Riley's advice was sought by young writers, who, strange to say, believed he had ascended to his place at a bound. When he was too busy to write the stranger an individual letter, he copied from one he kept on his table for common counsel. "Rail not at Fortune because you have lost your game," it read. "If the editor rejects your matter and persists in so doing, be patient and ask him why, and then correct what he says is wrong. Think no less of yourself but less of your *poem*, if he returns it. Take up the rejected product and pitilessly dig down into its vitals and find out its secret ailment, and set about a cure. Keep on shaping and filing and tinkering at it till the editor won't want to send it back. And whatever

you do, don't worry. All is well—even tears, if they slip up on a fellow when he is not looking, are good to see the world through every once-in-a-while. Every poet that ever made fame or fortune, made it through forcing down just such opposition as you or any coming poet must encounter. You must pass that gauntlet, or you are not a poet, and all your would-be helpers on earth can not make you one. If all young poets knew Patience and her most gracious uses, there would be more older poets of the proper dimensions. Keep on trying—not to address the *editors* but the *public.* In time you will find the kind of an editor I sought for fifteen years before I scared him up and bagged the gentleman. *Keep on trying*—though the critics peck away at you like rooks at a rotten apple. By and by you will be so inured to the treatment that you can no longer appreciate the dear old pain it once gave you. *Keep on trying*—and eventually you will not want any better fun than to see some obstacle lift up its ominous head in your path." (Wise, almost dramatic counsel, but the poet had not always lived up to it.)

In his letters Riley touched on questions that knock for answer at the heart of all young writers; and unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, he described his own exertions for literary prizes. Thus he did years after his magazine success, in a letter to Miss May L. Dodds:

Dear Miss Dodds:

All art work is hard work, and no excess of industry and patience can go along with the resolve to do any great thing right. *There is no easy way to do well.* Every master, in this day, was a *novice* 'way

back yonder—even though beginning, a positive genius. And in every instance, his line of development, I'll stake the soul o' me, owes more to searching, silent observation, like thought application, than to his *native endowment, inspiration,* or whatever else his rapt contemporaneous worshipers may choose to call it. It should be the study of any artist to *wholesomely* please the *audience.* Therefore that should be the *fundamental* study. What does the audience want? Always something *pleasant.* It *does not* want sobs and tears and agony,—it *does* want smiles and wholesome cheer and heartening words—and God knows it needs all this,—for in all its vastness it is made up of just such people as *our* people—*your* home folks and *my* home folks. So we must do our very level-best to win and hold their high esteem and favor.

Very truly your friend,
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

Miss Dodds was so emphatically encouraged by his first letter and so cordial in her appreciation of it that the poet, a few weeks later, wrote her a second:

Dear Miss Dodds:

Positively you must not be less assured of your work's real worth because it is returned—however many times. All writers—however established—suffer the same trial. So, just pocket all resentment and keep on writing—trying. It's wise, of course, to most diligently review your returned work—and twist and bore and dig out what *is* the matter with it. Maybe it's too sad—or hopeless—or too light, or too heavy. It's too *something,* or some editor would take it to his heart of hearts. Maybe its sole fault is some very trivial thing which no editor, however, has time to write you about. For instance, till two or three years ago, my manuscript invariably had warmth spelled *"warmpth."* In all seriousness, I ask you, if you were an editor with your desk stacked full of

proffered contributions, would you read any further than *"warmpth"* to convince yourself that there was a writer whose work had, of course, come from his hand and mind wholly unfinished and unworthy? Every day and hour there is something to learn, and we must keep at it cheerfully and with the gladdest possible heart. Read all best writers and *permeate* the secrets of *their* success. Their success, be sure, may be your own most righteously, if you sound the deep processes of their art, and learn with them to master the million little things which in time make up the glorious aggregate of perfection in any art.

With all assurance of and best wishes for your welfare every way, JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

Although Riley began seeking admission to the magazines at the beginning of his "Prolific Decade," not till its end did he find himself safe on the inside. The period was one of specters, dangers, pleasures, music and adventures. He sought encouragement in all directions. Time and again he refreshed himself with a sentiment attributed to Francis Marion—"THE HEART IS ALL: WHEN THAT IS INTENSELY INTERESTED A MAN CAN DO ANYTHING"—the household adage, which he had in youth from his mother, who remembered it as a tradition brought from the Carolinas by the Marine family. The poet hoped when the goal seemed inaccessible. Intensity of desire was the pledge of fulfillment. "I mean to keep up vigilantly my *longing* for recognition," he said; "that will augment Fate's favoring tendencies,"—his simple words for the more rhetorical language of the English Premier, that the man who broods lovingly and long over an idea, however wild, will find that his dream is but the prophecy of coming fate.

CHAPTER VIII

STORY OF HIS PEN NAMES

NOT until he had published his first book did the poet abandon the use of *noms de plume* and, as he said, set his full name at the dashboard of the whole endurin' alphabet. But even after that he was fond of signing fictitious names to letters, such as Doc Marigold, Uncle Sidney, Brother Whittleford, The Bad Haroun, Troubled Tom, Old E. Z. Mark, James Popcorn Riley, and to literary editors James Hoosier Riley, the Whitcomb Poet. At other times, particularly when chatting with friends, he was Truthful James, Philiper Flash, the Remarkable Man, and an Adjustable Lunatic.

J. Whit or Jay Whit was his first pseudonym in prose, affixed to sketches long since consigned to "the phantom past—stories too scant of genius or talent for publication." In poetry he first signed himself "Edyrn" to such baubles as "A Backward Look," and others, manuscripts now stained by the passage of half a century. Riley was strangely fascinated by the Tennysonian character. Eagerly he traced Edyrn's history through *The Idyls of the King.* The knight's reformation appealed to him strongly, doubtless through a resolution in his own life, formed "in the impressibility of youth and hope." Since he was approaching his majority his mother was especially

pleased, for she had been much concerned about his moral future. His father was inclined to severity. Her way was love. Evil, as Tennyson had shown in the poem, could be subdued. "Edyrn" had wrought a great work upon himself. One readily imagines the glow of hope and beauty in the mother's eyes when the son read to her this noble passage, and, after reading it, how they talked about the confusions of wasted youth and why it was that Love had so often to clasp hands with Grief. Tennyson went on to show that man seldom *does* repent and "pick the vicious quitch of blood and custom wholly out of him, and make all clean and plant himself afresh." Riley was not able, either by "grace or will" to do this at his majority. Seven years elapsed before there was a complete change of front—before (in his own words) he "began in dead earnest to stir up the echoes and make them attend to business." Many times he was "drowned in darkness" before he prayerfully asked himself: How many of my selves are dead? But the Tennysonian lesson and the mother's love were indelibly impressed on his memory.

"Drop your *nom de plume* that you may thoroughly enjoy the recompense of praise," wrote Riley to Captain Harris in the beginning of his fame; yet he himself at the same time was making the most of fictitious names. In 1878 Parker made public in the *Mercury* some advice to the author of "Flying Islands." "We wish softly but firmly to suggest to Riley," wrote Parker, "that certain tricks, which the public is beginning to understand, by which he seeks to give himself notoriety, must now be abandoned. He has the elements of the true poet in him. He has been very

successful in illuminating them, and has made an excellent start. Now he must depend upon the merits of what he produces to sustain and increase the reputation already achieved. Tricks and subterfuge will serve him no longer, and he must turn his back upon them."

Riley did not heed the advice. Too long, he thought, he had been signing himself Jay Whit or J. W. Riley. Straightway he decided to be more sensational. Almost immediately he attributed productions to John C. Walker, "a crack-brain poet," thereby starting the Walker boom. It was as if he had set a mantrap for the confusion of editors. Suddenly—click—click—and one by one they were caught, among them his dear friend of the *Mercury*, who was pleased to observe that "John C. Walker of the Kokomo *Tribune* has much of the peculiar flavor of Riley, and is certainly destined to divide honors with him."

The *Tribune* indorsed the *Mercury's* opinion: "Judging from Mr. Walker's more rapid stride into public favor (with no disparagement to Mr. Riley, of course), it certainly argues that Walker is destined not only to prove Mr. Riley's equal, but that he will eclipse him, and that too in the near future. Meantime, Mr. Walker will no doubt be highly gratified to be compared thus favorably to Mr. Riley, whose future is as bright as a June morning."

"John C. Walker of Indianapolis," wrote Bob Burdette in the Burlington *Hawkeye*, "is the Bret Harte of the Hoosier State. His *Tribune* poems have deservedly attracted wide attention, and they are the best attractions of that very generally attractive journal." The *Tribune* was content to add that Mr. Bur-

dette was correct except as to the residence of Mr. Walker, who was then "summering at his pretty home, Castle Nowhere, in the vicinity of Parts Unknown."

"John C. Walker" soon became the popular poet of the *Tribune,* and the occasion of considerable anxiety in the public mind. As an exchange had it, "He is bothering the literary people of our city more than the strike. Everybody likes his poems, but no one can establish his identity." A lyceum bureau, with Riley's name already on its list, wrote the *Tribune* to secure "Walker" for a lecture tour. The opinion prevailed outside Indianapolis that "Walker" lived in that city. The directory listed but two men of that name, and neither had ever been suspected of poetic abilities. The Indianapolis *Herald* was complimented, hoped the surmise would prove true, wanted to coax a contribution from the poet when the weather grew cooler. "We will wager a year's subscription," said the Mishawaka *Enterprise,* "that John C. Walker is none other than J. W. Riley in disguise. We can not prove it, but if Riley did not write 'Romancin' ' and 'Tom Johnson's Quit,' he ought to have done so. Moreover, the poet of the Poetical Gymnastics in the Indianapolis *Herald* has a very Riley-ish rhythm, and if he too is not our friend J. W., we should like mightily to know who the author is. We call upon both papers to rise and confess, and quiet the growing curiosity that prevails throughout the state."

Public curiosity was soon quieted. In 1879 the sympathies of *Herald* readers were touched by the poem, "Hope," which appeared mysteriously in the "Gymnastic" column in September:

"Hope, bending o'er me one time, snowed the flakes
Of her white touches on my folded sight,
And whispered, half rebukingly, 'What makes
My little girl so sorrowful to-night?'

"O scarce did I unclasp my lids, or lift
Their tear-glued fringes, as with blind embrace
I caught within my arms the mother-gift,
And with wild kisses dappled all her face.

"That was a baby dream of long ago:
My fate is fanged with frost, and tongued with flame:
My woman-soul, chased helpless through the snow,
Stumbles and staggers on without an aim.

"And yet, here in my agony, sometimes
A faint voice reaches down from some far height,
And whispers through a glamouring of rhymes,—
'What makes my little girl so sad to-night?' "

One memorable line revealed the mystery—"My fate is fanged with frost and tongued with flame." "There is but one genius in the state," remarked Myron Reed, "who could write that line, and he was born in Greenfield."

Thus was established "Walker's" identity and the veil lifted from "Poetical Gymnastics." Friends not only discovered the *real* authorship of "Hope," but a more important fact, that the tendrils of its author's love were reaching out to the fallen sons and daughters of men. Concerning "Hope," Riley wrote a friend as follows: "You like my poetry, I remember. As I have had a rhythmical attack to-day—nothing serious, but just a trifling vigor—I send you the best defined

symptom of my affliction, hoping you may find in it material for a smile." It was true that smiles predominated in Riley's verse, but in "Hope" friends found cause for tears. A similar poem, "The Ban," was written about the same time, and later awakened the sympathies of *Journal* readers.

When it was publicly known that Riley was the man behind the poems, he received some more advice. Both friends and strangers were concerned. "You make a great mistake," wrote one from Illinois, "in using two signatures. Do you not see that this robs you of half your fame?" "Shed your *nom de plume*," wrote another, "and shed it soon. Sign your own name, and don't let your laurels go sailing round on eddying winds."

He signed his name a year or two and then again grew restless. "I must improve the shining hours," he joked merrily one day in May, 1882,

> " 'New ways I must attempt, my groveling name
> To raise aloft, and wing my flight to fame.' "

Within a month he was galloping like a gamester before public curiosity as "Benjamin F. Johnson of Boone." In a letter to Roselind Jones, he told why he inclined toward the unconventional. He would have her know that the hours were twanging and tingling—poems were leaping and revelling through his veins. He was producing at the rate of two a day. "Years ago," he went on, "I received a letter from J. T. Trowbridge. I was then, as you are now, writing without reward, but hungrier a thousand times for some crumb of pecuniary recompense for my work. Trowbridge

said in order to make poetry marketable in this day and age, it must be a part of it—that is, it must possess the qualities of the great Present—dash, brilliancy, strength, originality—and always a marked individuality of its own—a striking something that would stamp it from the ordinary. These are not his words, but the meaning of them as nearly as I can give it, after the constant endeavor of years to follow his advice. Then it was not long till some hint of real success came dawning—not in the East, however, where naturally one looks for dawn, but here in the West, where are so many papers seemingly eager to advance and lend assistance to the poor, bedrabbled strugglers in the ever-standing army of poets, jingle-ringers, and verse carpenters. Since then I have been steadily gaining until now—with the exception of one magazine and paper of the East—I have more engagements for verse alone here in my western home than I can creditably fill—the pay not much, but still enough to humor some extravagances, and still increasing."

To Riley, on entering the profession of letters, the field seemed crowded. There were so many writers there could not be room for them all! The call came to him to make room for one more—room for himself. He was sure that he could not do this without a strong and honest consciousness of worth, and that he must always emphasize his belief in himself in his attitude toward the public. The public might call it egotism, yet the more he manifested it the sooner he "would shake hands with Success." In order to soften the offense of egotism Riley sought, by disguising their authorship, to distribute his wares widely and quickly. He thus circulated a great number of poems in a

limited time, won the public's approval, and at the same time avoided the danger of having his name too often in print. He also wanted to make clear to the public that he drew his inspiration from the scenes of every-day life. The public would love poetry, he believed, if it came to them in the natural idiom of a writer in whom cultivation had not suffocated the natural local sentiment, the frank, warm-heartedness of rural neighbors. The pathos, humor, and philosophy of that life would be more effective when clad in homely garb.

A short while before he began writing the Boone County Poems, Riley had called on Longfellow in Cambridge, who had previously assured him of the genuineness of his Hoosier dialect verse. There was no rich nor poor, no high nor low in poetry. "We are all of one common family," said Longfellow—and straightway Riley determined to verify, in his humble way, what his host had said. There was poetry in the tender thought beneath the veil of rustic phrase, and the public should recognize it. The personality of its author, whoever he might be, would become vividly interesting and an object of admiration and affection. Thus, when the real author should become known, his reputation would be widened.

"Johnson of Boone has a claim on our respect," said Riley in an interview, "because he is true to nature. I do not believe in dressing up nature. Nature is good enough for its Creator,—it is good enough for me. To me the man Johnson is a living figure. I know what he has read. People seem to think that if a man is out of plumb in his language, he is likewise in his

morals. Now the Old Man looks queer, I admit. His clothes do not fit him. He is bent and awkward. But that does not prevent his having a fine head and deep and tender eyes, and a soul in him you can recommend."

A further reason for using the pseudonym was the delight Riley derived from doing things in disguise. While the public was guessing, he could laugh in his sleeve. "You see," he remarked in extenuation of his whim, "I was not yet done with fooling. I was still afraid of my own name." He showed a curious liking for the genial old farmer of Boone. The wildwood verse of his neighborly poet, his rustic man of straw, seemed to please him better than that he wrote over his own signature. Indeed, he indulged the disguise to such a degree that it became vastly more to him than a fiction, just as, in his fancy, he had always at his side when writing poems for children, the Lad of Used-To-Be, who had appeared to him in a vision in boyhood.

"It was a dim, chill, loveless afternoon in the late fall of 'eighty-two," Riley wrote in his sketch entitled "A Caller From Boone," "when I first saw Benj. F. Johnson. From time to time the daily paper on which I worked had been receiving, among the general literary driftage of amateur essayists, poets and sketch-writers, some conceits in verse that struck the editorial head as decidedly novel; and, as they were evidently the production of an unlettered man, and an *old* man, and a farmer at that, they were usually spared the waste-basket, and preserved—not for publication, but to pass from hand to hand among the members of the

staff as simply quaint and mirth-provoking specimens of the verdancy of both the venerable author and the Muse inspiring him."

It was a somber afternoon, Riley goes on to say in the sketch, when the Old Man of sixty-five entered the *Journal* sanctum. He had the most cheery and wholesome expression in his face and eye that the poet had ever seen. He wore a low-crowned, broad-brimmed felt hat on his broad, bronzed brow, and an old-styled frock-coat, but a clean white shirt and collar of one piece, with a string-tie and double bow beneath a long white beard. Thus the farmer from Boone introduced himself, having come to town to consult "members of the staff" about the poems he had been contributing to the *Journal.*

In his introductory note to the *Homestead Edition* of his works, Riley expressed himself finely. "No further word seems due or pertinent," he wrote, "unless it be to emphasize the strictly conscientious intent of the real writer to be lost in the personality of the supposed old Hoosier author, Benj. F. Johnson. The generous reader is fervently invoked to regard the verse-product herein not only as the work of the old man's mind, but as the patient labor of his unskilled hand and pen."

The Johnson Poems, as readers of the Indianapolis *Journal* (where they first appeared) came to know and talk about them, "were so subtle in their grasp of character," it has been aptly said, "so artful in their artlessness, so brimful of the actual flavor and savor of the soil, that they fooled even members of the *Journal* staff, and they, like everybody else, supposed that the poems really came from some rural philoso-

Yours Truly
J. W. Riley.

The Hoosier Poet-Humorist
READING!
At FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
Thursday Eve'ng,
MARCH 18th

THE POET IN 1886, THE YEAR HE FIRST INCLUDED "LITTLE ORPHANT ANNIE" IN HIS PUBLIC READINGS

A Boyhood Memory, the Old Swimmin'-Hole in Brandywine Creek—1860

pher, some gnarled old farmer, in whose secret heart the sap of ancient summers was still astir. They were full of the homeliest similes, and the meter was as ragged as the sleave of care, but they contained unquestionably the touch of nature that makes the members of the human family love one another."

It was not quite true that the poems fooled everybody. A few discerning ones, such as Robert Burdette and Myron Reed, knew the Little Man behind the curtain. "Glad to hear from you," wrote Burdette from his country home in Pennsylvania; "glad to read Mr. Johnson's poems; glad to know at the second line of 'The Old Swimmin'-Hole' who Mr. Johnson is. Wish you could run down to this farm a little while. I am speckled as a railroad restaurant cracker."

The poem was printed in the *Journal*, June 17, 1882, under the caption, "A Boone County Pastoral," with editorial comment as follows:

Benj. F. Johnson of Boone County, who considers the *Journal* a "verry valubul" newspaper, writes to inclose us an original poem, desiring that we kindly accept it for publication, as "many neghbers and friends is asking him to have same struck off."

Mr. Johnson thoughtfully informs us that he is "no edjucated man," but that he has "from childhood up till old enugh to vote, always wrote more or less poetry, as many of an album in the neghberhood can testify." Again he says that he writes "from the heart out"; and there is a touch of genuine pathos in the frank avowal, "There is times when I write the tears rolls down my cheeks."

In all sincerity, Mr. Johnson, we are glad to publish the poem you send, and just as you have written it. That is its greatest charm. Its very defects compose its excellence. You need no better education than the

one from which emanates "The Old Swimmin'-Hole." It is real poetry, and all the more tender and lovable for the unquestionable evidence it bears of having been written "from the heart out." The only thing we find to criticize at all, relative to the poem, is your closing statement to the effect that "it was wrote to go to the tune of 'The Captain With His Whiskers!'" You should not have told us that, O Rare Ben Johnson!

Neither admirers nor adverse critics of "Johnson's" contributions suffered the grass to grow under their feet. Early friends were certain they recognized in the "sturdy old myth of Boone" a neighborhood boy, who once lived in Greenfield. Boone County sought diligently for Rare Ben Johnson, but found no one of the name in that "neck of the woods." Echoes of the poems came from Ohio and New England. A Harvard professor was cured of the *blues* after reading them. Two factions rose up in a western college town, one claiming that Benj. F. Johnson was the real writer and "James Whitcomb Riley" his pseudonym. Editors grew uneasy for Riley's fame, saying that "Johnson of Boone" threatened to excel Riley as the poet genius of Indiana. One writer, a Boone County pedagogue, pronounced the pastoral "a piece of dialect drivel,"—a criticism considerably at variance with Professor Henry A. Beers, who finds in "the quaint, simple, innocent Hoosier farmer, Benjamin F. Johnson, a more convincing person than Lowell's Hosea Biglow." The Boone County critic, bursting with local pride, was certain his region had been "grossly outraged." "Evidently," he said, "the *Journal* has been imposed upon by some designing youth, who contemplates breaking out as a dialect poet, and is merely feeling the pulse

of the public and testing the credulity and patience of editors before he appears full-fledged and frightful over his own name."

As the lyrical contributions continued to flow into the *Journal* office from Boone County, Riley increased the confusion among the exchanges by giving his opinion of Mr. Johnson's poetic value, sometimes an unfavorable one. Although the county poet was "by no means a man of learning or profound literary attainments," Riley was always glad to receive letters from him, always charmed at the "delicious glimpse" the Old Man gave of "his inspiration, modes of study, home life and surroundings." One exchange resented Riley's unfavorable comments. It was evident that "Johnson of Boone" lacked education, but it was contemptible in the *Journal* to hold up his imperfections to ridicule. "Johnson" had the soul of a poet, and had the *Journal* corrected the lapses in grammar and spelling, his poems would not suffer in comparison with those of Riley, the *Journal's* poet. "And that editor," said Robert Burdette, "did actually take 'The Old Swimmin'-Hole' and polish it and varnish it, set it up in good English in his weekly to show how fine the poem looked in custom-made clothes. As if one should put a mansard roof and a bay window on an old log cabin, tear down the stick chimney, brick up the fireplace and put in a register, tear the 'chinkin'' out of the logs, tear away the trumpet vine and honeysuckle, rough-coat it, paint it white and put on bright green shutters and say, 'There now, doesn't it look too rustic and romantic for anything?'"

Meanwhile "Johnson of Boone" kept on "peppering" the *Journal* office with his contributions, kept on prov-

ing that he, no matter how ungrammatically he wrote, had a message for the people because he had *lived.* Occasionally he accompanied a poem with a letter. "All nature," he once wrote, "was in tune day before yesterday when the *Journal* came to hand. It had ben a-rainin' hard fer some days, but that morning opened up clear as a whistle. No clouds was in the skies, and the air was bammy with the warm sunshine and the wet smell of the earth and the locus-blossoms and the flowers and pennyroil and boneset. I got up, the first one about the place, and went forth to the pleasant fields. I fed the stock with lavish hand, and wortered them in merry glee; they was no bird in all the land no happier than me. I hev just wrote a verse of poetry in this letter. See if you can find it."

The Old Man was well aware of his "own uneducation," but that was no reason why "the feelings of the sole" should be "stunted in thair growth":

"Ef I *could* sing—sweet and low—
And my tongue
Could *twitter,* don't you know,—
Ez I sung
Of the Summer-time, 'y Jings!
All the words and birds and things
That kin warble, and hes wings,
Would jes' swear
And declare
That they never heerd sich singin' anywhere!"

When, late in August, "Johnson of Boone" sent his poem, "My Old Friend, William Leachman," to the *Journal,* in which he referred to the old tavern, "Travelers' Rest," and the "Counterfitters' Nest," and the stage-coach and the old Plank Road, the author-

ship of the poems was disclosed and the Hancock *Democrat* announced definitely that they were "from the pen of our young friend and poet, James W. Riley." It might have added that he also was the author of the prose explanations.

There being nothing left but confession (Riley having accomplished his purpose), the *Journal* promptly printed "The Clover," the last poem in the "Johnson" series, with the following editorial comment:

The *Journal* prints this morning the twelfth and last of the poems purporting to be by "Benj. F. Johnson of Boone County." This author is Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, whose original purpose was to write a series of twelve, giving them the nominal authorship he did in order the better to carry out his dialectic idea. How well the assumption has succeeded the country knows. Mr. Riley has written nothing among all his productions that has had so generous reception and wide reading as these poems. Those who have looked to the Saturday *Journal* for Benj. F. Johnson's quaint but truly poetic contributions, full of homely pictures and contented philosophy will miss them from our columns, but they will be repaid with other literary work from Mr. Riley's muse.

Lastly, John Boyle O'Reilly was pleased to say in his paper, the Boston *Pilot*, that "a new name has recently appeared among Western poets, that of 'Benj. F. Johnson, of Boone County, Indiana.' Several of his humorous and pathetic dialect poems have appeared in our paper. It now appears that this was a name assumed by a young poet already well known in another field, Mr. James Whitcomb Riley. We congratulate him on the strength which enabled him to

win for two names a reputation that would satisfy many writers for one."

Thus the Hoosier Poet forsook his most popular *nom de plume.* He had been "given to this sort of thing" from the year he "discovered" the Poe Poem on the fly leaf of the old dictionary; never had been quite content to trust his own name; to hazard his own fame. Whether his whim was a gracious fault is of little moment now. Only a few years passed before critics uniformly indorsed the judgment of the masses, as voiced by Newton Matthews, when Riley gave the "Benj. F. Johnson" poems permanent form in *Neghborly Poems*:

"All hail Ben Johnson of Boone,
May the shade of him never grow less,—
May his fiddle be ever in tune,
To answer our hearts in distress;
May the lips of Dame Fortune still press
His mouth warm as roses in June,
And Fame, with old-fashioned caress
Still fondle Ben Johnson of Boone."

CHAPTER IX

HIS FIRST BOOK

IN the summer of 1882 the "Johnson poems" were referred to, if not endorsed by, the Republican State Convention when one of the nominees was called on for a speech. He was a corpulent gentleman, dressed in a navy blue suit, with tight-fitting trousers and swallow-tailed coat, and when he came rolling to the front he said: "I desire to thank this convention for the distinguished honor conferred upon me. You will observe, gentlemen, that I am not built for *running*, but I hope to be able to travel fast enough to see many of you in your homes this fall, and keep up with the Democratic funeral. We'll win at the election —we'll get there—'When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.'" (Roars of laughter and applause.)

Obviously the delegates and the spectators had been reading the Boone County verses; their author's audience was assuming the proportions of a political party.

As weeks sped along to the election and the New Year, inquiries began to come to Riley and the *Journal* office for the poems in book form. Now for ten years the poet had dreamed of a book. It is interestingly significant that he displayed real affection for a certain book of verse even when he was too young to read —simply for the *printing* it contained. He liked afterward to refer to this as his "first literary recollection.

Before I was old enough to read," he said, "I remember buying a book at an old auctioneer's shop in Greenfield. I can not imagine what prophetic impulse took possession of me that I denied myself the ginger cakes and candy that usually exhausted my youthful income. The slender little volume must have cost all of twenty-five cents. It was Francis Quarles' *Divine Emblems* (first printed in England in 1635)—a neat little affair about the size of a pocket Testament. I carried it around with me all day long. It gave me delight to touch it."

" 'What have you there, my boy?' a passer-by would ask.

" 'A book,' I would answer.

" 'What kind of a book?'

" 'Poetry-book.'

"When asked if I could read poetry, I shook my head and turned away embarrassed—but I held on to my Poetry-book."

"I wrote and illustrated my first book—a book of nursery rhymes—in my vagabond days," Riley said on another occasion. "Even then I had a dim, distant idea that some day I would break into print with a *real* book. I dedicated these rhymes to my sister Mary, referring to them as my first and perhaps my last appearance in book form."

All along the way he dreamed of a book, as indicated in his answer to some booksellers who had asked for his early poems in pamphlet form:

Greenfield, Indiana, October 23, 1877.

Gentlemen:

Answering your inquiry of yesterday—I have never published a volume of any kind. Trusting however

some good future will accommodate our mutual desire, I am very truly yours, J. W. RILEY.

The "good future" accommodated Riley in the summer of 1883. It was a little book, fifty pages—"about the size of a pocket Testament." Its publication was chiefly due to Riley's wise friend and counselor, George C. Hitt, who for a quarter-century was associated with the Indianapolis *Journal.* Mr. Hitt had known the poet Riley and the man Riley intimately for a number of years, and was ever a helpful, a loyal and an inspiring friend. There were times in those days when Riley was quite unhappy away from Indianapolis, fearing that he might do something his friend would not approve. He was always glad of an opportunity to write him, for "forthwith," he said, "troops of blameless thoughts came to heighten my happiness and self-respect." Mr. Hitt was his reliance when formal communications came from institutions of learning, which Riley (ignorant of conventional forms) knew not how to answer. "After vainly carpentering a whole half-day," he once remarked, "I went to Hitt, who knows how to do everything, and then, returning to my room, I answered my letter and went to sleep with clean hands and a clear conscience."

Writing Hitt from Greenfield in January, 1883, the poet was certain the days were dealing kindly; "generously, in fact," he said, "and though I do not deserve it, I am as glad as my colossal selfishness permits. I want this New Year to be as good to you as you have been to me."

The title of the book—*The Old Swimmin'-Hole and 'Leven More Poems*—Riley said was largely determined

by the public. In his readings he was nearly always introduced as the author of "The Old Swimmin'-Hole," and since that poem was so widely and favorably known, it seemed in every way a fortunate choice. Also it was in spirit with the old farmer who had dictated the poems, and best of all it commemorated a scene in Hancock County that had been locally historic since the days of the Log Cabin Campaign.

No one has told the story of the book's publication so well as Mr. Hitt himself: "From July 17 to September 12, of the previous year," said he, "the twelve poems in the volume appeared at intervals in the Indianapolis *Journal*. Locally they created a sensation. When it became known that Mr. Riley was the author, there seemed to be a widespread demand that the work be put into some kind of book form, and I undertook to do it, merely as a friend. I was the business manager of the *Journal* and I knew the author intimately. He and I talked together frequently about publication, but there did not appear to be any way to do it in Indianapolis, where there was, at that time, no book publishing house.

"Finally, in the summer of 1883, I concluded to go to Cincinnati to try to interest the old and well-known publishing house of Robert Clarke and Company in the matter. My efforts were fruitless. They looked at the copy but declined to publish the book with their name on the title page. Nothing remained but to contract with them for one thousand copies, as a piece of job work, which I guaranteed to do. At their suggestion, when we were discussing the title page, the name of George C. Hitt & Co. was used as the publisher, simply to complete the form in the customary

manner. Mr. Riley, in this case, was the 'company,' and it was a partnership of which I have always been proud.

"Robert Clarke and Company did a good piece of printing and carried out their part of the contract faithfully," concluded Mr. Hitt, "but they let a golden opportunity pass when they refused to appear in company with James Whitcomb Riley. That little edition of poems was the beginning of a phenomenal series of publications which have given Riley a national reputation. When the first edition was quickly sold—that part of the business was done by me at the *Journal* office—not desiring to continue posing as a publisher, I turned the copyright over to Merrill, Meigs and Company, Indianapolis, made a contract with them for a second edition, which was a facsimile of the first, except for a red border around the pages, and retired as a book publisher forever."

The poems, clipped from the *Journal*, were pasted on sheets of paper, a poem to a page, and the Robert Clarke Company, seeing that the manuscript had been hastily put together and that the poems were in dialect, declined to permit "the stamp of their house" to appear on what seemed to them an undignified collection of inferior verse. Rather than disappoint the poet, Mr. Hitt consented to masquerade temporarily as publisher, little realizing that he was involving himself in correspondence with other authors concerning publication of their manuscripts, and that one day the firm of George C. Hitt and Company would appear in Pool's index along with the great publishing houses of the country.

In connection with the publication were such items

of interest as the following: Riley went to Cincinnati to read the proof—the book was bound in imitation of parchment or vellum—total number of books given away, one hundred and three—twenty books returned —retail price fifty cents—total cost of printing and copyright, $131—total profit from the one thousand copies, $166.40—Riley says Hitt generously turned over to him all the profit—Hitt says they divided equally, and the latter is the authority—Hitt made all the arrangements for the second edition, securing for Riley a generous royalty, with copyright in the poet's name.

Thus the poet, faithfully working by day in the *Journal* office, and at night in his small, scantily furnished room across the street, began to build a fair future on "a small beginning"—a little pocket edition of poems, which has since been sought by collectors from ocean to ocean. After the lapse of an average lifetime one reads his simple foreword with pleasure and affection:

PREFACE.

As far back into boyhood as the writer's memory may intelligently go, the "country poet" is most pleasantly recalled. He was, and is, as common as the "country fiddler," and as full of good old-fashioned music. Not a master of melody, indeed, but a poet, certainly—

"Who, through long days of labor,
And nights devoid of ease,
Still heard in his soul the music
Of wonderful melodies."

And it is simply the purpose of this series of dialectic Studies to reflect the real worth of this homely

child of Nature, and to echo faithfully, if possible, the faltering music of his song.

J. W. R.

Indianapolis, Ind.,
July, 1883.

The reader even turns over the leaf gently that his eye may linger on the table of

CONTENTS.

The Old Swimmin'-Hole	9
Thoughts fer the Discuraged Farmer	13
A Summer's Day	17
A Hymb of Faith	20
Worter-Melon-Time	23
My Philosofy	28
When The Frost Is on the Punkin	31
On the Death of Little Mahala Ashcraft	34
The Mulberry Tree	37
To My Old Neghbor, William Leachman	40
My Fiddle	46
The Clover	49

Riley "set the little skiff afloat on the waves of public life," he said, "with trepidation. I had no way of knowing its fate. Making a book, you know, is the most ticklish, unsafe and hazardous of all professions. I was reminded of the preface in *Tales of the Ocean*, the old book which fed my hunger for stories in childhood. Its author laid no claim to literary excellence, and was prepared for rough handling from the critics; but he claimed to know 'every rope in the ship,' to be familiar with nautical life, just as I claimed to know the things in Hoosier life, of which my old farmer had been singing. When my book began to sell from the

Journal counting-rooms, I knew that its sails were spread, like those for the old *Ocean Tales,* and that its streamers were gaily flying, but whether it would meet with prosperous breezes or have to struggle with adverse gales and perhaps founder in stormy seas, yet remained concealed in the womb of time."

The poet's misgivings were brief. Almost immediately the public invested "the larger part of a trade dollar in the humor and pathos of the book," and after reading the verses, like Oliver Twist, asked for more. Years after, Riley incorporated the little book without change in *Neghborly Poems,* the first volume of his complete edition.

In July, 1883, Riley assured his old-time comrade, Samuel Richards, who was then an art student in Munich, that the Hoosier Poet was "building more fame than fortune, though the last—God speed it—would surely overtake him soon. Find enclosed a review of my recent book," he wrote, "a little unpretentious sort o' venture in Hoosier dialect which I feel sure will please you, however it may fail with the general public, though, so far, it seems to be striking home there, as well; and the Top Literati of America is just now storming me with letters of congratulations. O, my man, our little old visionary speculations along the ragged river banks at Anderson are going to materialize after all!"

Of course the critics did not become an extinct species when "The Old Swimmin'-Hole" appeared in book form, but their infrequent stings were mollified by the congratulations from many distinguished men and women. The little book was the beginning of a warm friendship with Mark Twain, who in succeeding

years often sent a word of good will to his Indiana favorite, once, while in Vienna, addressing an envelope to

Mr. James Whitcomb Riley
Poet & a dern capable one, too,
Indianapolis, Indiana,
U. S. of America.

The book "filled a lovely afternoon" for Robert Burdette. Edith M. Thomas was glad it had begun "to rain prosperity in the Hoosier Poet's latitude." If Riley was encouraged by one word more than another, it was the favorable comment of the author of *Castilian Days*, who wrote from

Cleveland, November 7, 1883.

Dear Mr. Riley:

I have received and read with great pleasure the book of poems you were so good as to send me. They have a distinct and most agreeable flavor, which is entirely their own. I particularly like "When the Frost is on the Punkin" and "Worter-Melon-Time." Thanking you sincerely for remembering me, I am,

Very truly yours,

JOHN HAY.

Puck found a copy of *The Old Swimmin'-Hole* and "it was as good as a swim to read it." Robert Underwood Johnson of the *Century Magazine* was "very much in sympathy with its substance." There was, however, "a tendency to over-dramatize the close of a poem," and in several instances Johnson confessed to a desire to draw a pencil through a final stanza. He wondered at Riley's power to compress "so much genuine human nature into so small a space."

Here began Riley's gratitude to the *Century's* editor for waking him up to the necessity of carefully scrutinizing and revising his poems before including them in his books. "There is no resting-place for an author," he said to a friend, "when once in public favor, and the higher the favor the more expected of him. Never should he let his ambition limp. He should be his own severest critic, so that when a poem gets past his own censure, he can bet on its passing safely through the public gauntlet." Answering the *Century* from "the banks of Deer Creek," where he was sojourning with a friend, he wrote as follows:

Delphi, Indiana, August 28, 1883.

Dear Mr. Johnson:

The frank, direct way in which you comment on my work pleases and makes me especially thankful to you. You are right as to my tendency to over-dramatize the culminations and I will try to avoid the error in the future, though it will be no trifling matter to make the correction. I believe strict art demands exaggeration, but to attain and control the nice quality and quantity of it is the rub. When you speak of the "genuine human nature" that you find in my attempts, I am encouraged to go on.

With your letter came one from Joel Chandler Harris, whose estimate, I think you will be glad to know, corresponds most happily with your own.

Most cordially and gratefully yours,

JAMES W. RILEY.

His answer to Harris—the next day and from the same address—was also the beginning of one of the most affectionate as well as one of the rarest relations that fortune permits men of letters to enjoy. Harris had written that Riley had "caught the true American

spirit and flavor." The Hoosier poems were distinctive, and, he added, "they will bring you distinction."

Delphi, Indiana, August 29, 1883.

Dear Mr. Harris:

Your recent good letter, favoring my literary ventures, should have received a prompter reply than this, but I have been skurrying fretfully about the country, with no breathing space till now.

It pleases me greatly to see, what seems, at least, evidence of newer and worthier ambitions in our present writers. The old classic splints are being loosened and taken off, as it were, and our modern authors are striking straight out from the shoulder. I would rather have you call my verse *Nature* and *American* than this hour find myself the author of "Queen Mary." While not a howling dervish in the patriotic line, I can truly say of the right scream of the Eagle, "I like it; it has a soul-stirring sound"; and I believe we are at last coming upon the proper spirit of this voice in literature.

Cordially and gratefully yours,

JAMES W. RILEY.

Along with the congratulations came requests for the new western poet's biography. One magazine asked for—Name in full—where born—where educated—when graduated—prominent positions—college degrees—author of what books?

Myron Reed was quick to see what a ridiculous figure the "full dress" magazine would make of the Hoosier Poet. Clipping a facetious description of Riley from an exchange, part of Eugene Field's, he answered as follows: "Our poet looks like a dapper young Episcopal clergyman. His hair is yellowish, his eyes china blue, and his complexion pallid. He wears no

beard nor mustache. He has the prominent nose of a successful jurist, and the tragedian brow, but his mouth is the ideal mouth of a comedian. In conversation his voice has the genuine Hoosier twang, with certain intonations that are strongly suggestive of the Yankee. He has published a book of poems, and contemplates a volume of short stories—the first work of the kind he has ever done."

Riley was more facetious than Reed about his history, but at the last had not the courage to send his own sketch to the "Top Literati." "You ask me for my life," he wrote a friend in Nebraska, "but I'd rather give you my money. I was thirty-one years old last spring was a year ago. I am a blond of fair complexion, with an almost ungovernable appetite for brunettes; am five feet six in height, though last State Fair I was considerably higher than that—in fact, I was many times taken for Old High Lonesome as I went about my daily walk. I am a house, sign, and ornamental painter by trade—graining, marking, gilding, etching, etc. Used to make lots of money, but never had any on hand. It all evaporated in some mysterious way. My standard weight is 135, and when I am placed in solitary confinement for life I will eat onions passionately. Bird seed I never touch.

"My father is a lawyer and lured me into his office once for a three months' penance, but I made good my escape and under cover of the friendly night I fled up the pike with a patent-medicine concert wagon and had a good time for two or three of the happiest years of my life. Next I struck a country paper and tried to edit, but the proprietor wanted to do that, and wouldn't let me, and in about a year I quit trying and let him

have his own way, and now it's the hardest thing in the world for me to acknowledge that he is still an editor and a most successful one. Later I went back home to Greenfield, and engaged in almost everything but work, and so became quite prominent. Noted factions and public bodies began to regard me attentively, and no grand jury was complete without my presence. I wasn't considered wholly lost, however, till I began to publish poetry—brazenly affixing my own name to it. But I couldn't get any money for it, although stranger editors wrote letters of praise regarding it. Then I sent a little of it to two or three real poets East, and they commended it, and I showed their letters and have been paid ever since. Still I am not rich. A skating rink proprietor who yearns to be a poet should be regarded with suspicion."

It must be evident to the reader that the Hoosier Poet in this sketch, as in many other remarks about himself, evaded the poetic label, and declined to be classified, at least as literary. "He is emphatically not a poet of the schools," wrote Anna Nicholas, "though many of his productions are of classic beauty and perfection." Neither he nor his poems were by nature made to fit into dignified pigeonholes. In pen-pictures drawn in his latter years he is sometimes described as a man who had all the polish of social and college experience. After he received his university degree, friends sought seriously to dignify him by addressing him "Doctor Riley." The attempt was vain. Titles were foreign to him; he belonged to the wide world of democracy. It was distinction enough to occupy his own place—somewhere in the line between his Boone County countryman and that "prime example of the

best characteristics and ideals of the Anglo-Saxon race," Abraham Lincoln.

It is true that in his last years he was less given, and naturally enough, to the delicious abandon that characterized him in the prime of life; but he was not then the "Benjamin F. Johnson of Boone, whooping along to other engagements, writing at a gallop with a thousand things to say and not time enough for five hundred,"—not the Riley of that prolific period when songs bubbled forth at the rate of two a day. Then and in his earlier youth he had an almost divine spontaneity. He was gaiety incarnate; often "excessively and delightfully silly." Of him it may be said, as it was said of Stevenson, that "a child-like mirth leaped and danced in him; he seemed to skip the hills of life; he simply bubbled with quips and jest." "Often when writing at night," to say it in his own words, "I laughed aloud, overjoyed with what the Muse had brought me." He had his moments of depression, of course, when he was a solemn youth, but the moments were not frequent. Of a truth, to know him was to love him and to laugh and smile with him.

The story of Riley's first book, so it has been said, would make a fitting companion to those discouraging experiences of Bret Harte, Jerome, Zangwill and Zola, who worked their way to recognition "by hard knocks that would have taken the respiration out of ordinary men and women." The statement is slightly exaggerated. The hard knocks came to Riley before his first book. When it was printed the bitter waters had been passed. It was the turning of the tide. After it the poet's ways, as far as book publication is concerned,

were mostly ways of peace. It proved to be the lark at sunrise, the harbinger of sixteen volumes.

The book has another claim on our attention. By it Riley became "the most discovered man in existence. Scores who bought it," said he, "claimed to have discovered me to the world. How unshaken each was in his belief that the puny, unpretentious tome had made the name and fame of the Hoosier Poet, and that he (the discoverer) had foreseen it all in the misty days of my wanderings!" A few discoverers, however, were genuine, Mary Hartwell Catherwood for one, who saw Riley "moving on magnificently"; who, five years before, when he wrote the "Flying Islands," was certain he "would rise to a pinnacle in the literary world."

In an important sense, as Burdette expressed it, "No one discovered the poet. For seven years Riley had kept the wheels revolving—some said without the slip of a cog, which was untrue—but the wheels had been turning. He had looked to himself and to Providence for success, and not to Congress or the state legislature." He had done a vast deal more work than his nearest friends dreamed. Although masquerading in his book as a farmer, he was also a poet for men of the city. He had tried to be as true to them as they to him. The people had said of his songs, This is our music; this is part of what we are.

CHAPTER X

ON THE PLATFORM IN THE 'EIGHTIES

CHARLES DICKENS was known almost as well by his public readings as by his books. Such, at least, was the popular opinion for many years after the novelist's last American tour. In London, when a young man, he had read from *The Chimes* to a few British artists and authors, among them Thomas Carlyle, whose grave attention weighed heavily in the balance when Dickens set his heart definitely on the platform. "I am thinking," he remarked early in his career, "that an author reading from his own books would take immensely."

He did take immensely. Better yet. In after years, as he sat in his quiet room, he had the dear memory of a people, whom he never afterward recalled as a mere public audience, but "a host of personal friends."

All this and more had made a deep impression on Riley. So alluring indeed had been the account that he almost lost sight of the difficulties that lined the way to the platform.

In England the opinion was quite general that the dramatic profession had lost an eminent name when Dickens failed to adopt the stage. A similar opinion concerning Riley prevailed in Indiana the year of his first book venture, so successful had he been as a public reader.

Up to 1883, and for several years after, Riley was strongly of the opinion that poetry did not pay, and it is not a wild exaggeration to say that no one was more surprised and pleased than he was when it did pay. He usually gave four reasons for his remaining on the platform, in spite of advice to the contrary from some of his literary contemporaries.

1. His resolve to make his own living.
2. His hunger to produce poems that would ring true to the hearts of the people.
3. His purpose to give wider circulation to his poems.
4. His desire to make people happy.

There was also the hope that public readings would help him to find a publisher. "My first book," he wrote a young writer, "I sent East (down to Cincinnati was East) where even my sponsor could not *give* it away—could not get them to look at it—much less print it on any terms but job rates—same as my ordering so many hundred placards and whackin' down every blessed penny—which every blessed penny I did not have to whack. So I turned my attention to as nearly a practical vocation as I could (public reading), hoping to widen my reputation until I should be known to the general public—then only could I hope my name would secure a publisher to help me out. And never till within the last year has any *notable* publisher made me an offer that involved a possible hope of my making a dollar. True, I have had here a local audience that at last began to pay me for the venture in book form that I took into my own hands. My present publishers take my books and give me a royalty. Simply, the whole thing involves infinite time and patience and

wholesome bravery, and is variously rounded into success after many years."

Fortunately there is extant the testimony of the old-time colleague and first publisher, who was also the poet's manager in those transitional years: "The present generation does not know," wrote Mr. Hitt in 1907, "it can not know the greatness of Mr. Riley as a reader. He developed that talent as his genius grew in poetry, and for years before he found a public to buy and enjoy his books, he had charmed multitudes with readings from his own work. In fact this outlet was for him a most natural one, because he was a born actor as well as a poet. His imagination drifted easily into dramatic channels, and what he saw and heard as a boy among the homely, wholesome people of Indiana he later transmuted into poetry, and unconsciously began to impersonate the characters that marshaled themselves in his fertile brain. Many of his well-known poems were offered to Indiana audiences long before they got into print, and nearly all his humorous prose sketches were familiar to his friends here at home before they delighted audiences elsewhere. His best poems were first printed in the newspapers, and were widely copied; but he was even then strong on the platform as the interpreter of his own product. The lecture bureaus finally awoke to the fact that he was desirable, and for season after season he had for his field most of the United States."

In his own inimitable fashion the poet once reviewed somewhat at length his career as a public reader, and that with Mr. Hitt's sympathetic corroboration should silence those, if any still exist, who look askance on his platform achievements: "In boyhood," Riley said,

"I had been vividly impressed with Dickens' success in reading from his own works, and dreamed that some day I might follow his example. At first I read at Sunday-school entertainments, and later on special occasions such as Memorial Days and Fourth of Julys. At last I mustered up sufficient courage to read in a city theater, where, despite the conspiracy of a rainy night and a circus, I got encouragement enough to lead me to extend my efforts. And so, my native state and then the country at large were called upon to bear with me, and I think every sequestered spot north or south particularly distinguished for poor railroad connections.

"All this time I had been writing whenever there was any strength left in me. I could not resist the inclination to write. It was what I most enjoyed doing. And so I wrote, laboriously ever, more often using the rubber end of the pencil than the point.

"In my readings I had an opportunity to study and find out for myself what the public wants, and afterward I would endeavor to use the knowledge gained in my writing. Myron Reed used to say to me, 'A poet should ride in an omnibus, not in a cab.' Reed knew my need, for he stood near the public heart. The public desires nothing but what is absolutely natural, and so perfectly natural as to be fairly artless. It can not tolerate affectation, and it takes little interest in the classical production. It demands simple sentiments that come direct from the heart. While on the lecture platform I watched the effect that my readings had on the audience very closely and whenever anybody left the hall I knew that my recitation was at fault and tried to find out why. Once a man and his

wife made an exit while I was giving 'The Happy Little Cripple'—a recitation I had prepared with particular enthusiasm and satisfaction. It fulfilled, as few poems do, all the requirements of length, climax and those many necessary features for a recitation. The subject was a theme of real pathos, beautified by the cheer and optimism of the little sufferer. Consequently when this couple left the hall I was very anxious to know the reason and asked a friend to find out. He learned that they had a little hunch-back child of their own. After this experience I never used that recitation again. On the other hand, it often required a long time for me to realize that the public would enjoy a poem which, because of some blind impulse, I thought unsuitable. A man once suggested 'When the Frost Is on the Punkin.' The use of it had never occurred to me, for I thought it 'wouldn't go.' He persuaded me to try it and it became one of my most favored recitations. Thus, I learned to judge and value my verses by their effect upon the public.

"Occasionally, at first, I had presumed to write 'over the heads' of the audience, consoling myself over their cool reception by thinking my auditors were not of sufficient intellectual height to appreciate my efforts. But after a time it came home to me that I myself was at fault in these failures, and then I disliked anything that did not appeal to the public and learned to discriminate between that which did not ring true to the hearts of my hearers and that which won them by virtue of its simple truthfulness."

Riley's success beyond the borders of his native state dates from his first reading in Boston, "the city of

twisting streets," he called it after being lost in them. His week there, friends said, was a grand investment for his whole career. He had dreamed of reading from the Tremont Temple rostrum ever since Dickens had triumphed there thirteen years before. He realized his dream the first Tuesday evening in January, 1882, appearing in his lecture on "Poetry and Character," as an extra attraction in the Bible Union Course. "Success absolute," he wired his physician in Indiana. "Remain over Saturday, the guest of the first literary Club of America."

That night the Boston *Transcript* made a discovery. "Mr. Riley is not only a genuine poet," wrote the editor, "but he possesses the rare power in recitation of conveying his own feelings to his audience. He has not been spoiled by any of the schools of oratory, but reads from the heart. He has fine poetic instinct, a keen sense of humor, good presence, a pleasant, flexible voice, clear, distinct utterance and remarkable power of facial expression—a strong combination of qualities, essential for one in his profession, and which should make him a strong card with the bureaus, and an especial favorite with the public."

An Indiana exchange congratulated Boston on its ability to discover without circumlocution the brilliant abilities of the Hoosier Poet. It also congratulated Riley on his Boston triumph. "Wherever," it said, "in the broad land the people are capable of appreciating good things, J. W. Riley will be immensely popular, and now that 'his bark is on the sea,' we wish him everywhere Boston receptions and ovations."

He arrived in the city a few days before the lecture, as seen in his prompt letter to Mr. Hitt, dated

Tremont House, Boston, January 1, 1882.

Dear George:

Everything is well, and I am going to "make it"—dead sure! I have been very flatteringly received, and the letters I brought are of much importance. With them yesterday I was piloted around to a wonderful extent—meeting not only notables to whom they were addressed, but "boosted" on by the recipients till I knew everybody of the ilk—all who were not out of town. The *Transcript* did not need an introduction—remembering me without, and—I am glad to assure you—with some little enthusiasm. I met Oliver Optic yesterday—a very boy-like old man, who already had a ticket to my show. John Boyle O'Reilly was out of town but is back to-morrow. *Positively assured* of an audience of at least two thousand people—the best. Longfellow himself would come, he told me, but that his physicians are just now restricting his gambolings. Dan Macauley and I saw the grand old man yesterday, in spite of the doctors who have tried to shut the world away from him. He was very, very gracious, and complimented me beyond all hope of expression. Can not tell you anything now—wait till I return with the laurels on *me* brow.

There are many peculiar features about Boston. I have seen Beacon Street, the Old South Church, Boston Common, and the Bridge where Longfellow stood at midnight, when the clocks were giving the thing away, and so forth.

As ever, J. W. R.

Subsequently Riley remarked that he had had many audiences indulgent enough to listen graciously to what he had to offer, and that he had been flattered and confused too with the expressions of their favor, but never before had he felt so unworthy of attention or commendation as when reciting a poem in Longfellow's presence.

Old Seminary Homestead, Greenfield—the "Crow's Nest."
The center window on the second floor was where the Poet worked

KINGRY'S MILL, WHERE PIONEERS "TUCK THEIR GRINDIN'" IN THE FALL OF FORTY-THREE

The unwritten portion of the poet's Boston visit and the honors paid him were in some respects more marked and important than his reception by the public audience—his "glorious yacht ride" down the harbor and his first view of the ocean at old Fort Warren, and other happenings. He had letters of introduction from Myron Reed to Trowbridge and Wendell Phillips. He especially admired Phillips, and one shares his disappointment when he failed to meet him. In his later years he carried Reed's *Temple Talks* in his valise when on the road, that he might read and reread the essay on Phillips. Reed's letter of introduction was strikingly characteristic:

THE JOURNAL.

Indianapolis, December 26, 1881.

Wendell Phillips—Boston.

Dear Sir: This will be presented to you by my friend, James W. Riley, who visits Boston by appointment of "The Redpath Bureau" and will make a tour in and about New England. We think highly of Mr. Riley and hope and indeed expect that he will please the people of the East. Please to give Mr. Riley such advice as will help him in getting hold. He is a native of Indiana and his prose and poetry are of the soil of this region but so thoroughly human that I think he will succeed anywhere.

With much respect,

MYRON W. REED.

"Last night," Riley wrote Hitt in boyish glee, "the president of the Papyrus Club drove around for me in a carriage on runners, and glanced me down to the St. Botolph Club, where they were entertaining the

Tile Club. It was glorious. There I met Howells, Aldrich, and a host of other celebrities."

In another letter to Hitt, the poet and Boston were becoming acquainted. "What makes a place lovable is being *welcomed* in it, and made thoroughly at home," he wrote. "I can not begin to tell you how dear to me old Boston is. It did not, just at first, seem to thoroughly appreciate the honor I was doing it, but now it is 'catching on,' and we are mutually looking over each other's shortcomings, knowing each other better day by day. I have a most pressing invitation to join the Papyrus Club at their anniversary banquet. I am destined to meet every potentate in the town. Just think of it! Men are bred and grown up here, through all gradations of development, with no other object than to work their final way into this Club—and fail and fade and droop away and die without accomplishing their object—and here I come and sidle in and do not even try—can't help myself."

There were surprises all round. His audiences could scarcely believe that the Hoosier Poet was the author of his recitations. James Boyle O'Reilly, a brother poet, was surprised at the impression his western friend made on distinguished men. "After a few days' visit," said he, "Riley left Boston with the conviction in the minds of all who met him that the West has a poet who has power in him to win a national reputation."

Although there was little to discount in Boston, ill winds blew when he left the city to fill other New England engagements. Two weeks as "a frost-bitten pilgrim" in a strange land ended in sighs for home, as seen in portions of a private letter from Boston:

"To begin with, I like Boston, as you know, but New England—? Of course I see it—what I see of it—in the most unlovely season; but it strikes me as the coldest, bleakest, barrenest and most forbidding country on earth. I would not die here for one hundred and fifty dollars a night. I would rather die in mid-ocean, with a bull shark for my burial casket. I used to think it was cold there at home, but it is May there now, I know, and I want to be queen of it. I want to wade in mud. I want to stroll up and down Washington Street (Indianapolis) in a rain-storm, with only a smile to cover me. Positively I am very homesick, but have only a pull now of a week or so further—then I will shake the everlasting snows from my feet, and get back to Indiana like a four-time winner.

"Every day and night, while in the city here, is crowded full of rare delights; but that only serves to heighten the lonesome, cheerless, dreary, weary experiences in the country. And, talk of the country! I tell you there is a country town here every mile-post and each one of them, to me, more desolate and uninviting than the last. My last experience, for instance: After leaving Boston, with only a sandwich and a gulp of coffee for breakfast, I rode and rode and rode, making 'three separate and distinct changes' of cars, with only time enough between changes to fall down once or twice between depots, at last alighting, at three-thirty o'clock, at the station where I was to take the stage for final destination. No hotel in the town—no anything but snow—and an hour to wait for the 'stage,' an open sleigh drawn by a horse with fur on him instead of hair, and a man to drive him, dressed like an Esquimau, with a fur cap pulled down over his

ears till all communication was stopped, and the gift of talking being rapidly forgotten. For ten miles I froze in silence, and through the glaze over my eyes could just make out the church was lighted ready for the lecture as we drove into town. Then up at six next morning, in order to back-track and make the train in time for the next point.

"Sometimes, however, the experiences are pleasanter. One night last week, for instance, only a half-hour out of the city, was an engagement at Salem. And Josh Billings was in, with a night off, and so went with me; and we went early and 'researched' the city's archives, for was it not there that, in the good old colonial days, they used to 'work off' witches? So we visited the scenes of the old-time horror. And we saw the original death warrants of the condemned, and listened to some of the very clever tests of how a witch was proved. It seems that they meant business in those old Puritanic days. And among other sacred relics, too, we saw a little phial of pins—ten pins, as I counted them (note how our modern game dates back), ten little, rusty, round-headed brass pins, corroded and green with the scum of centuries. And these pins were once displayed before the wise officials of Cotton Mather's time as having been plucked from the flesh of little children and other innocent victims of the Goody Coles of that day—still preserved, as Billings sagely remarked, 'as a kind o' religious soovner uf the days, witch is no more.'"

To speak truth Riley did return to his native state "a four-time winner." The East was no longer a sealed book. His old home paper (*The Hancock Democrat*) put another mark on the calendar of his progress.

Greenfield was glad that Boston had crowned him with laurels, and that his star was in the ascendent.

Always there was the unselfish service of the beloved Burdette. "If the house that greets Riley is half so large as his lecture is twice as good," he wrote a committee, "people's feet will stick out the dormer windows. My word for it, after hearing him you will want him to come back again and again." In June, 1881, he wrote the Redpath Lyceum Bureau, recommending his friend as the rising star on the humorous platform, thus "working" the poet into the Redpath list with such conspicuous stars as Wendell Phillips—John B. Gough—David Swing—Major Henry Dane—Mary A. Livermore—Robert Collyer—Josh Billings—and Russell H. Conwell. To consort with that list was a new experience in the life of the Hoosier Poet; but so it happened, his name (in alphabetical order) appearing near that of David Swing—"JAMES W. RILEY, Humorist and Dialect Reader, in his original impersonations, character sketches, and studies from real life."

The poet was now fully awake to the opportunity afforded him in this wider field. He had been told in Boston that he possessed the attributes of actor and author—a rare combination. It was within his power, Josh Billings had said, "to move an audience to any emotion he desired. His voice was musical, whether attuned to laughter or tears. He was not a poor mumbler of words." Some authors as they approach the footlights, Billings went on to say, "remind their audience of an undertaker. They read from their own works in a voice solemn as a cow-bell after dark. Riley will avoid such as he would a pestilence."

In February, 1882, under the auspices of the Redpath Bureau, the poet was "off for a series of readings" in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Delaware. Chief interest centered in the Star Course of Philadelphia—a triple entertainment in the Academy of Music, by Josh Billings, Burdette, the Hawkeye Man, and the Hoosier Poet. "It was a sparkling night," said Riley; "something to remember a hundred years." He recalled Billings pleasantly, his rugged brow and long iron-gray hair tossed back "like the mane of a lion," how he sauntered negligently across the stage and dropped into a chair and spread his handkerchief on his knee and moistened his finger-tips; and how the old hero of the rostrum began in trembling voice to drop those rough gems of wisdom that so often resembled the proverbs of Franklin.

Burdette's part of the program was to "make a few dry hits" in introducing Riley to the Quaker City audience. "Indiana," he said, "has frequently and widely been known more for what it is not than for what it is. Too often in the splendors of our gilded and barbarous Orient, we have used Hoosierdom as a synonym for verdancy and a low state of civilization and culture. Do you know that Indiana was vaccinated for colleges years ago and that it took splendidly all over the state? Do you know that there are five colleges on or near the Monon railroad, the slowest line in the state? I have no doubt all the *trunk* lines have more colleges. They *must* have. Do you know that Indiana has a better system of turnpikes than Pennsylvania? Do you know that Indiana put its foot down on tariff for revenue only? Do you know that our Conestoga farmers are turning their soil with Indiana

plows, and hauling their products to market in Studebaker wagons? But the best thing Indiana ever did for this audience was to take from the Indianapolis *Journal* sanctum, and send here to-night for our instruction and entertainment Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, whom I now have the pleasure and honor of introducing."

Riley's contribution was, in part, the lecture given in Boston. His poems were in dialect, he said, but he hoped "they would survive the fleeting favor of to-day." According to the press report "he proved himself not only a poet of genuine merit, but a speaker of rare ability, and the audience gave ample evidence of its appreciation of him in both capacities."

The wider field required lithographs, posters and new testimonials. The author of the lecture on "Milk" contributed (in "reformed spelling") to his friend's welfare as follows:

Salem, Mass., January 17, 1883.

Deer Publik: I take extreem delite in introdusing 2 yure imediate notis mi yung and handsum frend, Mr. James Whit Kum Riley, who iz a phunny man of purest ray sereen. He iz the only man i kno that plays his own hand, or, in wurds less profeshonal, the only man that gives his own produxions, and not other folks'. He iz phunnier than tung kan tell.

Yures without a struggle,

JOSH BILLINGS.

There was scarcely a town of five thousand inhabitants in New York and New England where Billings had not lectured, where an audience had not seen "the celebrated glass of milk on the stand, to which he never alluded." He heightened the demand for Riley

in that field. On the occasion of his death two years later, Riley gave expression to his gratitude in verse:

"Jolly-hearted old Josh Billings,
With his wisdom and his wit,
And his gravity of presence,
And the drollery of it!

"Though we lose him, still we find him
In the mirth of every lip,
And we fare through all his pages
In his glad companionship.

"His voice is wed with Nature's,
Laughing in each woody nook
With the chirrup of the robin
And the chuckle of the brook."

The new field required a new lecture, if new scaffolding for old reading selections constituted a new lecture. He gave the lecture the unlettered title, "Eli and How He Got There." It drew "crowded houses down East," but it was his poems that won the applause, not what he said in prose between them. The scaffolding of the lecture lacked strength of structure so that it was likely to fall to pieces. "How Eli Got There," said one who heard it, might as well have been anything else, since the entertainment consisted of recitations, which were as popular before he wrote the lecture as they were after it.

It was the general opinion of those who heard the lecture that the poet impaired its good effect by reading it. "If there is an individual in the universe," an editor wrote, "with moral heroism and courage enough to take Riley to one side and force him to commit it,

that individual will confer a lasting favor upon lecture-goers and Riley himself, by proceeding to set the thumb-screws in motion at once." As it turned out, the editor was the one individual who set the screws in motion. The poet promptly memorized the lecture.

But still it was defective. He talked learnedly, "at least made a show at it," he said, about famous generals, distinguished scientists and enormous birds. Sometimes he gave more particulars, for example, when telling about the albatross—how it was the largest of oceanic birds, how it could follow ships for days without resting, and how sailors, rounding Cape Horn, had seen it asleep on heaving billows, with its head under its wing. All very beautiful and interesting, but the poet was not the man to tell it. What had *he* to do with those splendid birds of the southern seas? Let him stay at home with the bluebird and the pewee. Let us have less of Huxley and Hannibal, was the hearers' desire, and more of Benjamin F. Johnson of Boone.

He told for the first time "The Old Soldier's Story"—how a gallant private carried a wounded comrade off the battle-field—but it was not well told. Five years passed before it took the true humorous-story form and became "about the funniest thing" that Mark Twain "ever listened to."

About 1884 the lecture title was changed to "Eccentricities of Western Humor." Later it was "Characteristics of the Hoosier Dialect," and still later, "A Little Attenuated Capability," which might as well have been any other title so far as it related to the text. New poems, "Knee-deep in June" and "Kingry's Mill," were included in his list of recitations, and a

prose sketch, "The Dicktown Wonder," a speech in dialect of an old-time legislator at a natural gas meeting in his village, which happened to be in the heart of the "Great Indiana Gas Belt." As "cheerman" of the meeting he apprised his neighbors of the vast resources under them, and admonished his community "to keep clear heads" and "stretch every nerve" to the great possibilities ahead of it.

Changes in the poet's entertainment continued to the year 1887, when the lecture feature was wholly discontinued. Henceforth "an evening with Riley" meant the recital of his poems, accompanied by "those delicious interludes" which made his readings famous.

In the half-dozen years with the Redpath Bureau, return engagements had been the rule. He had lectured in most of the cities and in scores of small towns from Manhattan, Kansas, to Maine. The rewards had been sufficient for a livelihood; on the whole, more to be desired than the evils to be dreaded. Woes had been cumulative. He "was crowded along in a sort of lockstep through the year. Distraction," he wrote a friend, "follows in the wake of this relentless business. Nighttime I always like, for then I talk to crowds, but through the day—hurry, worry, bother, bluster, anxiety, and hunger for companionship. Strangers to the right of me, strangers to the left of me, and always the spiteful and convulsive jerking of the car, and the din and clangor of the wheels, and the yelp of the bells of the passing trains, and so on, *ad hysterium!*"

Sunday was his lonely day. His experience one winter in Pennsylvania is a sample of what happened at other frozen points. He wrote George Hitt about it from the

Tifft House, Buffalo, N. Y., February 2, 1883.

Dear George:

The papers sent to Lock Haven were glorious. I have read them into shreds. Stayed there over Sunday—had a big house there Saturday night, though I did not get in till half past eight. Everybody delighted, as it seems everybody has been every place I have appeared. Guess I am really doing better than ever before. No single point visited yet that I have not been assured of a recall. But it is still cold. Certainly, as congestive as the western thermometer has been, it has not reached the level of the East. Coming here from Portville yesterday, the frost on the car windows reached the depth of a quarter of an inch at least, and the wind was something awful. It seemed we would be blown from the track, and that half the time the cars were running on one rail, with trucks cocked in the air and freezing like a rooster on one leg.

But I must close. Have met all the newspaper men, and been treated royally by them. They are fine fellows and all seem to know the *Journal* well.

Hastily, JAMESY.

While "locked up" in Lock Haven, he wrote to another associate on the *Journal* (Lewis D. Hayes) in rhyme, entitling the same

MY HOT DISPLEASURE.

[And then I'll curl up like a dog in a basket,
And drop sound asleep as a corpse in a casket.]
—Old Couplet.

Dear Hayes:

I'm shut up in a primitive town
Where all hope has gone up, and all enterprise down;
Where the meetin'-house bells ever wrangle and moan
From morning to night in a heart-breaking tone,
And the few mournful people one sees on the street
Are all wending their way to some holy retreat

Where God is supposed to impatiently wait
For their coming, and greet them, enrapt and elate
With the "honor" they do Him, while bending the knee
And begging Him tearfully not to damn me,—
And here I stare out through an eight-by-ten pane
With my thoughts in the past and my eyes in the rain!
But—well—I've a fire that's doing its best,
And a split-bottom rocker offers me rest,
And a new magazine, and tobacco in stock
Sufficient to last till the peal of the clock
Of the dawn of the morrow shall chuckle me free
Of the horrors of Sunday—God pitying me!
I'm not in a mood, you'll observe, that is quite
At peace with the world, or at war with delight,
Yet honestly striving to gallantly bear
With the trials, disaster, and trouble and care
That is mine to endure. I will murmur no more,
But lie to myself and be glad as of yore.

The week that is past was a good one to me,
And my show well received as a circus could be,—
The people all tickled—Committees the same,
And my praise—like a sky-rocket fired at Fame;
And, a moment ago, counting over the great
Fat roll in my pocket, I'm happy to state
I found that I had, with but little lack yet,
An opulence vast as the depths of my debt,
And that, as I've promised, when settled entire,
Will give the right to the rest I desire,—
When I may curl up like a dog in a basket
And drop sound asleep as a corpse in a casket.
J. W. R.

There was frost outside the car windows and sometimes inside, and yet the road had its compensations, acquaintance with and sometimes the golden companionship of distinguished men, whom, without the vexations of traveling, the poet had not known. One day

in the Empire State he met Matthew Arnold. At first thought, an unhappy situation might be inferred in the meeting of two men who seemed to be at the antipodes of social intercourse. Just what was Arnold's opinion of the Hoosier Poet is unknown. Riley's letters and conversation about the foreigner gave at times a cartoon effect. "A gaunt, raw-boned Britisher," he once remarked to a reporter, "with Scotch hair, Scotch eyes, Scotch complexion, mutton-chop whiskers and a cowcatcher nose": a contrast indeed to a portrait of the Hoosier at the time—"a short, robust young man, with a florid complexion, large nose, smooth-shaven face, blond hair, and very practical-looking, near-sighted blue eyes behind a pair of glasses." And yet, notwithstanding the Englishman's harsh features, supercilious manners and the report that he parted his hair in the middle, Riley had an affection for him. "How the big, well-fed man with his single eye-glass and pronounced British speech," said he, "could have written anything so tender and sympathetic as 'The Forsaken Merman,' it is impossible for me to realize. Never again will I trust to appearances." All the same, Arnold had written it, and it had become for Riley a favorite poem. "There was," Riley said, "a certain cadence in the lines which softened the woes of the road," and many times he repeated them—

"Now the great winds shoreward blow;
Now the salt tides seaward flow;
Now the wild white horses play,
Champ and chafe and toss in the spray.
Children dear, let us away.
This way, this way."

The travelers had a half-day's journey together—two hundred miles in a railway car. Arnold told of his experience in New York, how he had been to hear Henry Ward Beecher, and how he had been so luxuriously entertained by the Union League, the Century, St. Nicholas and Knickerbocker Clubs. But it was impossible to work there. In vain he had tried to write his lecture on Emerson. The blaring publicity of the city had no parallel. Interruptions were incessant. "Americans," he said, "have no love of quiet. They have an abnormal desire for publicity, must be on the go all day long." This led him to observe that there were no cabs, and no privacy in America for a gentleman. "I go out here to lecture in a city at the other end of the state," he said, "and I have to travel by tram and before reaching my destination make changes and take the chance of a walk in bad weather." All of which Riley knew was true, and yet he could not help having an inward sense of satisfaction that this king of letters from the British Empire was becoming acquainted with the ways of democracy.

Riley remembered that about noon the talk turned to American literature. Arnold praised Poe warmly. "I do not recall," returned Riley, "a single cheerful thing Poe ever wrote. Has a man any right to blot hope out of this world? That is all we have. Probably Longfellow had as many doubts and fears as Poe, but he did not voice them in his verse. Poetry should deal with bright and beautiful things."

Riley fancied that he had in this made a center shot, but the face of his British acquaintance, he said, was "as cold and inexpressive as an iceberg at anchor in the Strait of Belle Isle." (He had not the slightest

notion of the location of Belle Isle, but it was a high-sounding simile and that was sufficient.)

Riley's experience with Arnold was unique. He promptly wrote Myron Reed about it from the

Tremont House, Boston. (January, 1884.)

My dear Reed:

I don't know whether you will like Matthew Arnold or not—I know you like some things he has written. Two or three days ago I met him, coming out of New York into Binghampton, and had some opportunity to inspect him—my way.

He is English thoroughly, though quite Scotch in appearance. Until you hear him speak you would say Scotch. A tall, strong face, with a basement-story chin, and an eye eager, unconscious, restless; gray and not large. A heavy man physically, though not of extra flesh—simply, a fine manly skeleton properly draped. He is self-sufficient, and yet trying to do better, on his own advice, not at all snobbish, and yet with hardly enough vanity to stand the criticism. He is a marked combination of learning, fancy and matter-of-fact. An hour before we became acquainted I inspected him and saw his colossal mind lost in the lore of the railroad guide the same as if it were Homer in the original text. I noticed, too, that when he bought a three-cent paper, he took back his two-cent change and put it away as carefully as he would a five-pound note. He is poor, however, and I mention this only as an instance of a national characteristic which may perhaps have been inherited—only in these "God-bless-us-every-one" times I could but remark in mental aside, " 'Tis very good to be American!"

He seemed greatly pleased with all he saw and spoke honestly of his surprise at the country he found here. Was utterly stolid, however, and enjoyed it all like working a sum. Didn't parade himself—and wore arctics and never forgot his umbrella. Much of the

time, too, he was studying his lecture—in printed form—and ignoring the dailies that were having so much to say about him. I think he has no sense of humor whatever. A joke that tackled him, would hide its head in shame, and skulk away and weep.

Riley's admiration for Arnold was hardly to be expected, and yet as weeks passed it was deepened. "I like him," he said for publication in Kansas City a month after meeting him; "I like him for his sturdy grandeur." He admired his courageous adherence to the old law that moral causes govern the standing and falling of men and nations. On reaching America, Arnold had given his lecture on "Numbers" in Chickering Hall, New York. He had talked plainly about society in England and the United States. He deplored the madness of the multitude. The multitude was affording the means for their own destruction. It was clear to him that the majority were unsound. The unsound majority had been the ruin of Greece and Rome and would be the ruin of England and America. Riley in *his* lecture was talking to his audience about the educational advance of "the swarming millions," and how they were being "led along to the highest altitudes of light" by our educational institutions. To Arnold the question was a deeper one. The education of the masses was essential, but unless they were *transformed* they could not finally stand. Myron Reed was in the habit of quoting Lincoln to Riley that "the people wabble right." It was clear to Arnold that they often wabbled wrong. Wabbling wrong meant their doom. Educational institutions alone could not transform them. Why flatter the college and the university, since but a minute fragment of the population is

reached by them? Neglect and evasion were wicked. There was no dodging the issue. The majority was unsound.

As Riley went from town to town he did not join in the criticism of Arnold or the cries of the newspapers against him. It was good, he thought, for Americans to face the facts.

As the lecture engagements increased, there was alarm in certain quarters over what was termed "the greed for pelf." Arnold was violently attacked for lecturing for "filthy lucre." Josh Billings escaped the fire by telling the newspapers that he "lectured for nothing with one hundred dollars thrown in." Mammon, it was said, was getting his clutches on the Hoosier Poet. "With all due respect to the recognized genius of J. W. Riley," wrote a critic, "we are sorry to see him prostituting it upon the stage. He is not an actor, and but an ordinary mimic. He lacks both voice and physique, important factors when a man faces an audience. Then, he does not improve. His bear story and peanut lesson are growing just a little stale. They will hardly wear like Rip Van Winkle. He reads well, yet the late Artemus Ward was greatly his superior. Riley is a genuine poet and a writer of strong and original prose. His place is among the magazines of the country, and there he can make his mark, and stand with Holland, Howells and other novelists, and with Swinburne, Stedman, Taylor and other poets of wide reputation, and in years may approach Whittier and Longfellow. But his desire to make money has overbalanced his better judgment. We are proud of Riley, and hope the day is not far distant when he will see the error of his way."

The ovations he received on his last reading tour, twenty years later, refute the charge that he was not a success on the stage. His "Object Lesson" did wear like Rip Van Winkle. Had the writer accused him of bowing to Mammon at a later period, he might have had grounds for his conclusion, but to say it back there in the 'eighties was to interpret falsely. Then, for Riley, the daily question was, how to make a living while writing poetry. He was weary of dependence, and the "perpetuity of old accounts,—grisly old ones," he said, "that had been handed down through the ages from the panic of 1873." He wanted to be known as solvent—"put off all foreign support and stand alone." Returns from his readings varied from thirty to sixty dollars a night. Little was left after deducting the Bureau's commission and expenses. Often there was a long distance between engagements. His profits vanished in railroad fares. "My next lecture is at Weeping Water, Nebraska," he once moaned, two hundred miles from his destination. "I have every assurance that my appearance there will make it all its name implies."

There were the losses from stormy nights and "bad business," and requests for lower terms for a second reading to make up for the deficit on the first. One committee, however, which had lost fifteen dollars, was content with an autograph.

"Jes' my ortograph, you say,
Will pay all I owe you—eh?
Only wish 'at I could pay
All my old debts that-away!

"Cross my heart! and 'onner bright!
I'd stay 'way from Church to-night,
And set down and write and write
Clean from now till plum daylight!"

The profit from his *Old Swimmin'-Hole and 'Leven More Poems* was also light. No royalty check of four thousand dollars came to him at the age of thirty-four as it did to his "dear old Mark Twain."

The charge that Riley was prostituting his genius on the stage was a more serious one. No one knew better than he the damaging effect of travel and its attendant evils on the poetic impulse. He was emphatically of the opinion that "mentality is at its lowest ebb in a railway station." How could a man write poetry when "darting up and down and round the country like a water bug!" Traveling had also, in his opinion, a painful effect on conduct. "You see, aside from new complexities of work," he wrote a friend, asking her to forgive his untidy scrawling, "I am corresponding with a Bureau; and through elevations of hope and depressions of doubt and suspense, am kept dancing up and down like the vacillating balance of an apothecary's scales. I can think of nothing but myself in reality, though I have to affect such poems as this, ["The Dead Wife"], just handed to the printer half an hour ago. But do not judge from it that I was ever married, since, fortunately for my wife that might have been, I never was; for, at times and oftentimes, I am a very disagreeable young man. Nothing in earth or heaven, I almost think, would satisfy me then."

Two years later he wrote the friend again: "My holidays have not been opulent with gifts, for I have been thrown and tossed about most carelessly by circumstance, having to fill these wretched, but most blessed lecture engagements, in which I am forced to forego all personal desires and hopes and simply be an automaton till the curtain falls on the last poor act, my friend, and the season's quit—quiet—dead and buried."

And by a season usually was meant a division of time less than a spring or a summer. After a few weeks of fatigue and exasperation, his conscience the while "tearing away at his heart like a leopard"—he would begin to curse the interruptions. "God Almighty knows," he would moan, "I do not deserve them. The switching and hooting of freight trains, and the rumbling of Pittsburgh Specials and Manhattan Limiteds can provide more disaster for a poet in one hour than solitude yields in a year. He does not have to court calamities. Street crossings and railroads breed them faster than carrion hatches flies." The result of such wailings was of course a curtailing of Bureau engagements, and a return to Indianapolis and the quiet of the "Dead Rose" or the "Crow's Nest."

It would be incorrect to conclude that the road did not yield poems. It did. The poet wrote them in spite of the interruptions. "Take your time," wrote a magazine editor. "Well, now, my dear man," answered Riley, "I can not take time to do anything. I am running round Indiana like a case of ringworm. Besides, I know not how many Decoration poems and a college oration, I have all my regular work to do,

which just *has* to be done. When your letter came I could not sleep. So I wrote this conceit [a poem] which I have hunched and stabbed and punched and jabbed into present shape on the train since five o'clock this morning."

Several of the "Boone County poems" were begun "away from home." Many ideas for them came through car windows from barnyards and cornfields. They were not written to order, nor were they produced immediately preceding their appearance in the *Journal*. It was pure fiction that the poet, under pressure of the managing editor, went to the desk one evening and "dashed off a poem in time to keep a theater engagement." Part of "My Philosofy," (the first of the series in order of production) was written at night in a country tavern after a public reading. The poet had seen a bully in the lobby, whose swaggering and faultfinding had been an offense to a mild old shopkeeper. The latter's comments were too worthy to be lost. Going to his room, Riley reduced them to rhyme:

"The signs is bad when folks commence
A-findin' fault with Providence,
And balkin' 'cause the earth don't shake
At ev'ry prancin' step they take.
No man is grate tel he can see
How less than little he would be
Ef stripped to self, and stark and bare
He hung his sign out anywhare.

"My doctern is to lay aside
Contensions, and be satisfied:
Jest do your best, and praise er blame
That follers that, counts jest the same.

I've allus noticed grate success
Is mixed with troubles, more er less,
And it's the man who does his best
That gits more kicks than all the rest."

All in all, the experience on the road had been of surpassing value. By voice and pen he had been "rescuing from oblivion," the disappearing vernacular of the frontier, and the thought of an age in Indiana that was fast passing away. By degrees he had so perfected his recitations that there was little left for anything but applause. On every hand was flattering evidence of his growing popularity. "He interprets with sympathy and insight," said an intellectual observer, "those little things to which the rest of us are blind. Always hereafter we shall like his readings for what he has written, and his writings for what he has read."

CHAPTER XI

ON THE BANKS OF DEER CREEK

ONE evening in August, 1883, a score of happy Hoosiers drove from Delphi, along the road up Deer Creek, to Camden, where their favorite poet gave his lecture on "Characteristics of Western Humor." After the lecture his friends bought copies of *The Old Swimmin'-Hole,* on sale at the door, and returned with the poet to Delphi, where a week later he repeated the lecture to a charming audience of Delphians. Never before had the people of that region found a man who could so happily interpret so many different phases of humanity in a manner so masterful. It was the beginning of Riley's frequent visits to Carroll County. In the immediate years to come, the region had a decided influence on his production of verse. It also influenced his reputation on the platform.

For the fourth time in four years he had the honor of filling the Baptist Church in Franklin, Massachusetts. After his last reading his audience left the church with some very catchy lines on their lips:

"Well! I never seen the ocean ner I never seen the sea.
On the banks o' Deer Crick's grand enough fer me!"

At lectures afterward, in towns between New England and Nebraska, he was sometimes introduced as the

"Bard of Deer Creek." He rather enjoyed it. In no sense was he a bard of the city. As has been seen he loved to make some odd character the mouthpiece for his verse. Near Delphi he found a farmer, whose Eden was on Deer Creek, and from whom he caught the refrain: "On the banks of Deer Creek is good enough for me."

Scarcely had he reached his destination when he told George Hitt and the *Journal* of his good fortune:

Delphi, Indiana, August 27, 1883.

Dear George:

Had a big house and big time at Camden, and a first-class success seems assured here. Shut up at work as you are, I feel altogether unworthy of the rest and peace that has fallen on me. Every day a long invigorating breath, the graciousness of which I am sure no seacoast could rival; and every day a drive with my friend to his farm seven or eight miles in the country. And every day I wish I had come here months ago, and yearn to stay months longer.

As ever Faithfully and always Yours,

JAMESY.

It was said that Riley fished along Deer Creek from the Wabash to Bachelor's Run. "I never held a pole an hour the whole time I spent there," he declared. The facts were he was fishing for poems and he found them, such as "The Boys," "A Poor Man's Wealth," "The Beautiful City," "The Blossoms in the Trees," "Wet-Weather Talk," "Knee-Deep in June," and a score more. True he found them in his imagination and memory, and sometimes he finished them in Indianapolis or Greenfield, but they originated on Deer

Creek. The stream and its vicinity awakened the "songs of long ago." There were winding miles of country roads, bordered by little orchards, clover fields, and the dark retreats of forest trees—majestic elms, beech, walnut, hickory, ash and sycamore still standing. Red apples "burned in the tangled grass" as the poet had seen them in childhood. The cider press blended its chuckle with the lowing of cows and the droning of the bees.

"If there was no opportunity to go to Delphi," said Riley, "I made one. It was a refuge from the sweltering heat of the city. My friend, Doctor Wyckliffe Smith, gave me a warm, full-chested welcome. He belonged to the Old Settlers' Association, and knew the history of families in that region from the time their neighbors were reptiles, wolves and Indians. He was a jovial, whole-souled man. He lived solely for the benefit of others. His largeness of heart was not bounded by Carroll County. In our Spanish War it reached to the hospitals and battle-fields of Cuba."

Riley chants the praise of his "Delphian Oracle" in his poem, "From Delphi to Camden"—a ride with his friend on a rainy night:

"While the master and commander—the brave knight
he galloped with
On his reckless ride to ruin or to fame was—Dr.
Smith."

The reckless ride suggested or rather awakened out of memory another poem, "Billy Could Ride." Substitute Riley for Billy and the reader has a picture of a Greenfield incident in the Grant and Colfax campaign, when Riley and other young men rode behind a slow

three-mile "delegation" on the old National Road,—when he, in a fit of impatience on a prancing chestnut mare, whipped suddenly forward into town:

"And to see him dashing out of the line
At the edge of the road and down the side
Of the long procession, all laws defied,
And the fife and drums, was a sight divine
To the girls, in their white-and-spangled pride,
Wearily waving their scarfs about
In the great 'Big Wagon,' all gilt without
And jolt within, as they lumbered on
Into the town where Billy had gone
An hour ahead, like a knightly guide—
O but the way that Billy could ride!"

While riding with the Doctor at another time, Riley called one evening at the quaint home of a German farmer, whose garden and orchard, late that night, blossomed in "Herr Weiser," the initial poem in *Afterwhiles*. He had discovered another dear old man—the picture of unassuming honesty, a hale countryman "reflecting the sunshine."

Political excitement in the summer and fall of 1884 was intense. "The people down here," wrote a lecture committee of Cambridge City, Indiana, "are going to elect Blaine." Postponement of Riley's lecture there and elsewhere until after the campaign, gave him another interval of peace and quiet on Deer Creek. Early in the summer he had gone there for another reason—the absence of The Thousandth Man from Indianapolis, "which," he said, "made the whole heart faint and lonesome." "Myron W. Reed," he wrote a friend, "is about leaving his church here for other fields, and the city generally is in mourning. What a good man

he is—and how Burns would have loved him! I have tried to write him a poem, 'Our Kind of a Man.'" At once the poem began its cruise in the newspapers, coming to anchor afterward in *Afterwhiles*. Near friends described the life-history of the preacher in the first six lines:

"The kind of a man for you and me!
He faces the world unflinchingly,
And smites, as long as the wrong resists,
With a knuckled faith and force like fists:
He lives the life he is preaching of,
And loves where most is the need of love."

The next summer (1885) the wires brought from Mt. McGregor the news of the death of General Grant. For two weeks the republic wore the emblems of mourning, and Delphi, with the other communities, bowed its head in grief. Memorial services were held in the Skating Rink, a gathering of three thousand people "with four times as many outside," who could not gain entrance. On the afternoon of August eighth, while the burial service was being read over the dead warrior, the Delphi audience listened to an address by Judge J. H. Gould and a poem by Whitcomb Riley, entitled "At Rest," prepared for the occasion and read with impressive effect. (In *Afterwhiles* it received the simple title, "Grant.")

Riley was chosen spontaneously to voice the feeling of the people. "Imbued with patriotic spirit," it was said, "J. W. Riley is the Indianian above all others to put in verse the tribute of our state to the memory of the great soldier." He was the people's choice—but thereby came vexation to the poet. "The very

seconds of the clock," he said, "piled in heaps of misery around me."

It was one of the rare instances when Riley succeeded in writing a poem to order. But writing it was like reaching a result at the point of the bayonet. On the afternoon of the day before its delivery, Judge Gould found Riley in his room with papers, books, and pencil-notes scattered right and left on the floor. "For days," said the judge, "Riley had been in agony. His eyes were abnormally large; he trembled at the thought of failure." It had been the literal truth that he could not see daylight. He had not dared to go out on the street for fresh air and sunlight. "It was the rule of General Grant," said Riley to the program committee in the evening, "to be ready, and here I am with to-morrow calling for 'copy'—not ready. When the General had done his best he could leave a thing, commit all to Providence. I can *not* leave a thing, most certainly not when that thing is a poem. I am driven—harnessed to my charge. I can not rest. I think now the poem is finished, but midnight will call me from bed to make a change."

For inspiration, while writing the poem, Riley read Tennyson's ode to the great Lord Wellington. Particularly he repeated:

> "Our greatest, yet with least pretense,
> Great in council and great in war,
> Foremost Captain of his time
> Rich in saving common sense,
> And, as the greatest only are,
> In his simplicity sublime."

He had also a sentiment about Sir Launcelot from The Age of Chivalry, which afterward became the

On the Banks of Deer Creek, Beloved Scenery which Inspired "Knee-deep in June," and Other Poems

Old Settlers' Meeting at Oaklandon, Marion County, Indiana—1878

introductory note to the poem, how the knight returned from the wide wild forest, unlaced his helmet, and ungirdled his sword, and laid him down to sleep upon his shield. But most of all, Riley cherished his own lines, his vision of the boyhood of the Silent Man, a youth with the courage of his emotions:

"A brave lad, wearing a manly brow,
Knit as with problems of grave dispute,
And a face, like the bloom of the orchard bough,
Pink and pallid, but resolute;
And flushed it grows as the clover-bloom,
And fresh it gleams as the morning dew,
As he reins his steed where the quick quails boom
Up from the grasses he races through.

"And does he dream of the Warrior's fame—
This Western boy in his rustic dress?
For, in miniature, *this is the man* that came
Riding out of the Wilderness!
The selfsame figure—the knitted brow—
The eyes full steady—the lips full mute—
And the face, like the bloom of the orchard bough,
Pink and pallid, but resolute."

Ignorance of Riley's method of composition prevailed in Delphi as in Greenfield and Indianapolis. He "opened his dark sayings on the harp," but his friends failed to comprehend him. In August "On the Banks o' Deer Crick" was printed in the Delphi *Times*. "When did he write it?" they asked, knowing how he had been absorbed in the Grant poem. He was contributing regularly to the *Journal*—such poems as "Griggsby's Station," "Ike Walton's Prayer," "Curly Locks," "Billy Could Ride" and "Dave Field." When did he write them? The truth was he did not

originate them then. He answered the call for "copy" from his budget of poems, some of them new, others weeks or a year old. "The Banks o' Deer Crick" was written two months before it was printed. He wanted "to caress it" a while—"love it all alone." At the Pioneer Picnic, a week after the Memorial service, he read a long poem to a crowd as large as that which gathered in memory of Grant. Again the question, When did he write it? He wrote it seven years before and read it at the Reunion of Old Settlers, at Oakland, Indiana. Pioneer Day two months later (October, 1878), appearing on the program with Mrs. Sarah T. Bolton, he read it again at the old Indiana State Fair Grounds. Twelve years later part of the poem was detached and entitled "A Child's Home—Long Ago" for *Rhymes of Childhood.*

In appreciation of what the poet had done for Carroll County—in reality what he had done for the good name of Indiana—the citizens of Delphi, "desiring to do the square thing," tendered him a public benefit, a reception at the Opera House. It was a memorable evening, the poet was at his best in his recitations and everybody satisfied—*with one exception.* The night of the benefit Riley slept, as he sometimes did, in Doctor Smith's office, in a little room separated by a thin partition, half-way to the ceiling, from the main office. The next morning a woman called at the office while Riley was still sleeping. She had a biting tongue and a prejudice against all forms of entertainment, and the Doctor knew it. Here was his chance to get even with the poet for some practical joke Riley had played on him. After prescribing for his patient, he said as she rose to go:

"By the way, did you hear Riley last night?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Did you ever waste money so recklessly before?" asked the Doctor, contributing to the severity of the criticism he was certain would follow.

"I never did," said she. "The Hoosier Poet comes up here to our town sponsored by Billings, Mark Twain and Longfellow. Burdette says he is pure gold; I say he is pure *gabble.* If I had my money back—"

Scarcely had she uttered the words when flip over the partition came a silver half-dollar, which landed on the floor at her feet. In their joint astonishment the Doctor picked it up, very suavely handed it to her, and she left the office wondering where it had come from.

In a few moments Riley came through the partition.

"Well—well," smiled the Doctor, "I did not know you were awake."

"I was not awake," drawled Riley wearily, "but there are times—there are times—when suffering from nightmare—that I—that I reach my trousers—and my pocketbook—in my sleep."

At Delphi the poet planned his second book, *The Boss Girl,* a title he was afterward as much ashamed of as at first he was proud. The second edition of *The Old Swimmin'-Hole* had been going well and he had been mailing copies to authors "in domestic and foreign lands." One copy at least reached Great Britain as is seen from his letter to the English poet:

Indianapolis, Indiana, U. S. A., March 17, 1885.
Mr. Robert Browning.
Dear Sir:

"From his poems, as I take it, Robert Browning is a brave intrepid man. No fear but he can face your book and never flinch!"

So a sound, but oftentimes facetious friend said to me yesterday, and so I send you the book. It is a small collection of American dialectic poems, or rhymes rather, in the "Hoosier" idiom—the same as faithfully reproduced as a lifetime's acquaintance with a simple, wholesome people and their quaint vernacular enables me to portray it. For years I have believed that unused poetical material in fairly rich veins lies in this country region, and a music too, however rude, in the quaint speech of the people. In the specimen I beg you to accept, should you find even trivial evidence of the truth of the theory I shall be glad.

God bless you, sir, and believe me, from years prior to this, and now, and on and on,

Your friend,
JAMES W. RILEY.

He had found abundant poetical material on Deer Creek, and had been making use of it, but it was fresh from the mint—not, in his judgment, the kind of material for a new book. "A new book must contain old productions," by which he meant poems or sketches that had been written months or years before. After the lapse of time and the "final revision" they were more likely to ring true. Then too that was by nature Riley's way of doing things—keeping up the wires between him and his heaven of existence, the Long Ago. Not only his first and second book but all his books, with rare exception, were made in that

way. It was not his fashion to sit down and say, I will write me a book. He compiled it from what he had already written and revised it most rigorously unless prevented by the demands of the platform. "Going over the trunks and boxes and old nail kegs and beehives," he wrote George Hitt, "I have dug out enough stuff for three or four books. Am in splendid kelter and inclination for work, and believe I am sound now for years—nerves shattered—but heart and soul shipshape and eye serene and steadfast facing the guns."

In *The Boss Girl,* consisting of ten poems and ten prose sketches, Riley went back for copy as far as "Fame" and "The Remarkable Man," back nine years, to February, 1877. The sketch which gave the book its title had been so popular in the Indianapolis *Journal,* that the issue had been exhausted. Readers could not forget the "boss girl's" dismal room with its smoky lamp and broken doors—her wasted hands, her haggard face, and the dark star-purity of her luminous eyes. There also in cherished memory was the elf child, the little pixy-form of Mary Alice Smith on the stairway.

The poet had determined on the character of the book at Delphi. Returning to Indianapolis he experimented several days on an illustration, a design for the paper-back cover. In this he was assisted by Booth Tarkington, then a youth to Princeton and *Monsieur Beaucaire* unknown.

Once a week in those days, the poet strolled "uptown" to bask in the sunshine of the Tarkington household, where, by telling stories of books he had read, and acting scenes from them, he kept his little audi-

ence chuckling and laughing by the hour. "One night," writes Tarkington (the boy in the genial picture), "the poet came to the boy's house in a state of unusual gaiety over a book he was going to have published—his first book to be printed over his own name. That night the poet drew a design for the cover, an ink bottle mounted like a cannon and firing a charge of ink which formed, in explosion, the letters in the list of titles for the sketches. The poet seemed anxious to know how the boy liked the design; and the boy, encouraged to add something, drew an imp leaning down out of the cloud with a quill pen in his hand, the pen firing the touchhole of the ink-bottle cannon; and thus the cover was printed and that boy insufferably puffed up."

This book marks the beginning of the poet's good fortune with his publishers (now The Bobbs-Merrill Company). A little circular issued by them at the time suggests the cordial relation between them and the poet, which was never broken.

THE BOSS GIRL

A Christmas Story

AND OTHER SKETCHES

By

James Whitcomb Riley,
Author of "The Old Swimmin'-Hole."

It gives us much pleasure to announce that on December 1st we will publish a new book, under the above title, by Indiana's favorite Poet, Author and Lecturer. Those who have read Mr. Riley's "Old

Swimmin'-Hole," or revelled in the humor of his lectures, will be delighted with

THE BOSS GIRL.

This little book reveals the twofold ability of the gifted author. Mr. Riley's insight into life is marvelous, and powerfully appeals to the heart. We congratulate both ourselves and the people at large on the publication, which, we feel, is assured of a hearty welcome and widely extended sale.

Price, Cloth, $1.00. Paper, 50c.

Respectfully,

THE BOWEN-MERRILL CO.,

Publishers, Booksellers and Importers,

16 and 18 West Washington Street,

Indianapolis, Indiana.

November 23, 1885.

The first edition was quickly sold, while the poet was on the wing. He wrote Doctor Newton Matthews:

January 1, 1886.

Dear Matthews—and an uncommon happy New Year!

Awful glad you like the book. It is better than I dared to hope, however hard I set my teeth and wished and wished and wished. The last sketch is my pet—"The Spider," and I was fearful you were not going to say a word in praise of that. Now it is all right and I am perfectly relieved.

The book is clean out of print—a week ago. Next edition delayed by paper—'ad-dam it! and had it been ready would have been exhausted too. Too bad! Last night at Champaign (Illinois). Nearly a thousand people; and your friends—every one of them—and mine, too, now, I hope,

As I am Yours, J. W. RILEY.

A year or two and the poet was less enthusiastic about the book. There were many errors in it, many lines and occasionally a paragraph that would have been stricken out had he had the opportunity to work on the proofs. "The ghost of Dickens," wrote a prominent friend and critic, "has laid his hand on some of the stories. On the whole they are disappointing. The poet has been switched off on the wrong track. He should stick to poetry."

A while longer and his sighs grew to downright dissatisfaction over the defects. "If you have visited Mount Vesuvius during business hours," he wrote a a friend, "come now and see me in a state of eruption over this book." Answering an English publisher (1888) who had made inquiries about the stories he said: "As to *prose* work for your magazine, I could engage to furnish nothing for some months at least. Here—much as I deplore the fact—few but the writer seem at all taken with that work; and in consequence all orders lean decidedly to verse—and that too in dialect. Of prose therefore I have printed but one book, and that almost wholly unknown except to the very prescribed market of my native state. It was, to begin with, unhappily named—then, unfortunately, edited in my absence. All its manifold defects I much want to exterminate and set it forth again, for I believe in it, and nothing would better please me than for an English house like yours to manifest an interest in it."

Three years later the poems were omitted, and the title changed to *Sketches in Prose,* the second volume in the poet's complete edition.

CHAPTER XII

THE SILVER LINING

"I WRITE for the Executive Committee of the International Copyright League to invite you to participate in the Authors' Readings, which are to be given in Chickering Hall, New York, November 28 and 29. Lowell will preside and Curtis, Clemens, Cable, Howells, Stockton, Warner, Eggleston, and Page will read from their own works. It will be a great occasion and worth your while to come."

Such was the invitation extended to Riley by Robert Underwood Johnson then editor of the *Century Magazine*. It dropped from the clouds—a day in November, 1887. Five years before the poet had come off with flying colors from Boston Town, and each year since, it had been his hope to win distinction in Gotham. He had talked about it to writers, "from Matthew Arnold down to the Bard of McCordsville," he said. For a decade the League had been holding annual meetings in New York, at which authors had been reading from their books, but no invitation had been sent to the Hoosier Poet. In February he had won much praise with "The Old Man and Jim." "You have hit the bull's eye this time," wrote the editor of the *Century*. "The thing is a poem clean through. I would give a hundred dollars to have written it."

But a magazine reputation is rather a transient thing. What Riley's friends and associates preferred just then was an opportunity for him to do something

in New York that would claim the attention of the newspapers. "In the matter of my readings," he wrote Johnson, accepting the invitation, "I will try very hard not to disappoint you, for I feel as gravely conscientious as I am grateful for the opportunity so generously offered."

The prospect was most alluring although the invitation came at a time when he was "crowded and hustled along pell-mell" in work on a new book. "Off at next gasp for New York and Bill Nye," he wrote Doctor Matthews, November twenty-third. "As yet I am not at liberty to state my mission, but in confidence you must know that I go there to read with American Authors. Is not that a great big and all-swelled-up honor for the little bench-leg poet out of this blessed Hoosier Nazareth? Only think of it!—introduced by James Russell Lowell to thousands of the crowned heads of the strictly élite literary eye-and-ear auditors of that Athens! Oh, heavens!—I feel indeed that I am a poor sewing girl. Will send you word of my success, big or little—or none."

Next to the Authors' Readings, Riley's lodestar in the eastern visit was Bill Nye. They had exchanged affectionate letters for a year, and Nye when passing through Indianapolis, like Burdette, "remained over for a call on the *Journal* Works." Their letters were long and as Nye said, "often contained anecdotes not intended for the public's enjoyment." In the first letter quoted below he had intended to write one that Riley would put in his "autograph album" and point to with pride, but he soon discovered that it was not that kind of letter. "When I have been garnered in at last," he wrote, "and come before the Throne,

scared half to death for fear that the Almighty will introduce me to the audience and ask me to make a few remarks, I hope, Jamesie, that you will not produce this letter and humiliate me."

Nye had recently joined the staff of the New York *World*. He wrote Riley in September. This letter, in part, and Riley's answer, in part, and the November letter arranging for their meeting, follow. Nye's residence was on Staten Island, a half-mile from St. George landing, and it was really a miracle that Riley reached it:

My dear Jamesie:

I wish you knew how many friends you have in this young and growing town. It would make you well. I went into a Broadway office the other day and heard a publisher recite "The Harelip." I had never heard it and I was pained to hear anybody recite one of your poems in the "O-Mother-may-I-go-to-school-with-Charles-to-day" style; but his admiration was mighty sincere and you could see that you had reached his large, dark red heart.

My syndicate letter (the coming week) will be devoted to you. It will do you no harm. I am very sorry you have not seen the Sunday *World*. I judged you would see it at the *Journal* Works. If you will notice my efforts you will see the footprints of your brain across my later geological strata like the eccentric trail of a drunk and disorderly Ichthyosauria going to his preadamite roost. This is not intended to cast any reflections on you in the matter of the Demon Rum, but more to show you how great has been your influence on the better class of literature.

Good-bye, my dear Jamesie, with the best of wishes and the assurance that I will always use my influence for you at the Throne of Grace.

Yours Ever, BILL.

The Journal, Indianapolis, November 11, 1887.

(Confidential)

Dear Nye:

Just now there is an invitation to me to come and "say a piece" at the Authors' Readings. Consulting my own intentions about the matter, I find that I can go, and thus hasten to warn you of the fact, so's you can have your chores at home purty well off your hands and the house red up perparitory-like, as the feller says, to receive me with corroberatin' eclaw; and, last but not least, to ast you if I hadn't better fetch along a extry shirt, and buy my tobacker here, as I have heard *my* kind is not to be had there fer love er money. I wish, too, that you and Catalpa [Nye's wife] and the fambly would meet me at the depot—wherever I git off at, so's I won't git carried past and run on into some other town where I hain't got kith ner kin. I'm the blamedst fool travelin', I reckon, they is outside o' the durn lunatic asylum—'bout not gittin' trains, er gittin' the wrong one, and all sich aggervations that-away.

Mr. Johnson mysteriously postscripts invitation to keep Reading in the dark for a few days—wonder why, and what 'ud become of a feller if he'd take it back, and I'd not get to go there after all. Reckon though, it's all right, as I bet on his friendship among the first. Write me soon and allus believe in me.

As ever your

JAMESIE.

New York, November 18, 1887.

My dear Jamesie:

Your note received just as I was embarking for a little lecture "spirt" and now that I am back again I will write to say that I will meet you at whatever train and time you say and welcome you with a big and pronounced welcome then and there. I went over

to Boston and jerked a few remarks for them the other evening. Kind friends came and laughed heartily.

There was a brief announcement the other day in the papers of the Copyright Benefit but only a partial list of the attractions. It is a big thing, one of the best in a literary way in the Union and will be presided over by our friend, James Russell Lowell who, as you know, is the author of "The Old Swimmin-Hole and 'Leven More Poems."

Write me at once and tell me accurately, giving me your *Motif*, and time table and how and when and where to meet you at Jersey City or the other depots of our young and thriving town, so that I will be there an hour or two beforehand walking up and down the platform with my team hitched outside ready to take you out to the farm where Catalpa and dear ones will be ready to greet you. Till then, "olive oil," as the sayin' is. Good-bye—and God's best and freshest new laid blessings on your soft and flaxen head.

Yours with anticipations and things,

BILL.

"They were of humble origin with little of what the world calls education," Riley had read a score of years before in the *British Painters*. "They came from the great academy of nature and the influence of studios or galleries of art had no share in preparing them for the contest." Precisely so it was with the poet when he came to the "contest" in Chickering Hall. He was of humble origin and had little of what the world calls education, but he did have for daily encouragement the faith and good will of Indiana—a large, intelligent population that believed he had the ability to charm the people of New York as he had often charmed the people at home.

The desire to see and to hear such an unusual group of distinguished authors drew to Chickering Hall an almost equally distinguished audience. An hour before the doors were opened the sidewalk, steps and stairway were densely packed. It was not easy to get within half a block of the hall. Inside, the audience filled every available foot of space, standing several rows deep around the walls of the famous auditorium. Many distinguished men sat on the platform—Charles H. Parkhurst, Lyman Abbott, Robert Collyer and many others, including representatives from the magazines and the leading publishing houses.

The Readings were in the afternoon and the second day program was as follows:

James Russell Lowell—"The Finding of the Lyre," "Aladdin," and "The Courtin'."
Colonel Richard M. Johnson—"The Early Majority of Mr. Thomas Watts."
Thomas Nelson Page—Christmas scene from "Unc' Edinburgh's Drowndin'."
Charles Dudley Warner—"The Hunting of the Bear."
Frank R. Stockton—"Prince Hassock's March."
William Dean Howells—"The Breaking of Dan's Engagement."
George William Curtis—"The New Livery" from the "Potiphar Papers."

At the close of the program there was confusion in the audience and some show of impatience, for it had been, as often before, shown that an author's ability to *write* well was no guarantee that he could *read* well. Mr. Lowell, the chairman, promptly rose and announced that letters had been received from Bancroft, Holmes, Whittier, Henry James, Robert Louis

Stevenson, John Hay, General Lew Wallace and others, and then lifting his hand for silence and to check those who had turned to leave, he said:

"Ladies and Gentlemen—I want to thank you for your kind attention without which these readings could not have been a success. I also desire to thank Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, who has so generously consented to favor us again to-day with one of his delightful selections. I confess with no little chagrin and sense of my own loss, that when yesterday afternoon, from the platform, I presented him to a similar assemblage, I was almost a stranger to his poems. Since then I have been reading one of his books, and in it I have discovered so much of high worth and tender quality that I deeply regret that I had not long before been acquainted with his work. I have been so impressed with the tenderness and beauty of the poems that I read that I almost hope he will give one of them now. But whether it be one I have read or something else, I am sure it will be something good. To-day, in presenting him, I can say to you of my own knowledge that you are to have the pleasure of listening to the voice of a true poet."

The applause which followed amounted to a demonstration. It would be erroneous to conclude that it was all for Riley. Lowell had been idolized both afternoons. But Riley had been so conspicuously successful the first day that his reappearance, unannounced on the program, the second afternoon, was the signal for an ovation. The first day, to quote Miss Jeannette Gilder, "he sailed in as though he had been born to the stage and gave a performance that the most illustrious comedian might envy." The New

York papers acknowledged him "the position in American literature, which his genius and versatility deserved." The first day he recited "When the Frost Is on the Punkin," one of "those little things," said the *Herald,* "which are not spoiled by being well done. He did it so well as to excite screams of laughter, but in the 'Object Lesson' he tickled the intellectual palate with as excellent a piece of mimicry as Chickering Hall ever saw and capped the climax of the afternoon's enjoyment."

Just before Riley appeared, George W. Cable recited in dramatic style a selection from his story "Grand Point." Then, said the *World,* "the stranger and the success of the occasion was introduced. This was James Whitcomb Riley. In a poem and a character sketch he sunk the author in the actor. The fun of the other authors shriveled up into bitter patches of melancholy in the bright light of Riley's humor. Doctor Howard Crosby, who occupied a conspicuous seat on the stage, laughed until he looked as though he would faint, and finally in sheer nonsectarian uproariousness poked Bishop Potter in the ribs and subsided."

Riley's selection for the second afternoon firmly established his reputation. Here was his golden opportunity to justify his claims for dialect, and he did it with "Nothin' To Say," a characteristic poem in which is shown an old father's tenderness to his motherless daughter when she tells him she is going to be married. In reciting it, it was said, the poet gained the approval of the entire audience. "The silence was intense with applause." Both men and women manifested deep emotion.

For years there had been among the scholarly what seemed to Riley an unthinking prejudice against his dialect which he had not been able to dispel. He held that the use of dialect was necessary to the full interpretation of certain phases of human life. The scholarly were grieved because it was a blemish on refined speech. It was therefore a decided victory, when in New York he gained the applause of the intellectuals. One of the most erudite critics in the list said that "Nothin' To Say" did not depend on the vernacular. "The feeling, the pathos of the touching little poem gives it its value, and the dialect is simply its strongest and most fitting expression." A popular book, *Winning of the West,* was then maturing in the mind of Theodore Roosevelt. Riley's purpose in the American Authors' Readings was the winning of the East —and he won it.

Seated in the front row of the hall was the wife of a United States Senator, who had heard Riley recite "Farmer Whipple," when he was "training" with the Wizard Oil Company in Lima, Ohio. At that early date she had recognized his genius and predicted his fame. She was not therefore surprised when Chickering Hall rang with applause.

Naturally the center of delight over the New York enthusiasm was in Indiana. "The whole town—and State," Riley wrote Nye from Indianapolis a fortnight after the Readings, "has been upside-down about the New York success, and in consequence I have been giving my full time to shaking hands and trying to look altogether unswollen by my triumph—if I may so term it. Positively you have no idea of the gen-

eral and continued rejoicing of the press and friends. Were it any other distinguished citizen than myself, it would turn his head; but as it is I am bearing it, Bill, about as you know I *kin,* when I set my jaws to it." As Nye said, "It took weeks for the general enthusiasm of the State to get back into its banks again."

Hoosiers were particularly flattered over the recognition Lowell had given their poet. Four years before Riley had sent to Lowell at Cambridge a copy of *The Old Swimmin'-Hole.* Lowell was in England and did not receive it. "Why have I not heard more of Riley?" he remarked to a friend on the second day of the Readings. "Tell me all you know about him. I sat up last night till two o'clock reading his verse. Nothing that the poets have written in this country for years has touched me so deeply as 'Knee-Deep in June.'" This was a tribute without a string to it. It made no difference to Lowell that Riley had been born and reared west of the Alleghanies.

While receiving congratulations Riley gave interesting impressions of the authors he had met. LOWELL —younger than anticipated, clad in a black suit, a man of medium height and polished manners with grace and felicity of expression. CLEMENS—innocent, artless, brimming with undiluted mirth, did not possess the fatal gift of beauty but was better-looking than Bill Nye. STODDARD—the critic, the skilled anatomist in all literary fractures, sprains and dislocations. EGGLESTON—of tall figure and substantial frame, whose shock of hair might be taken for a hazel thicket in his native heath. HOWELLS—with the youthful atmosphere still about him that a score of years before

fascinated Lowell at Elmwood. STOCKTON—not so tall, yet, in quaint manner, features, eyes and expression, resembling Myron Reed. CABLE—delicate in figure, a platform favorite and funny as ever. CURTIS—hale and sturdy, of vital force, with sonorous voice, and sound of frame as a Norseland Viking. WARNER—another Viking, but in manner simple, quiet, delectable. PAGE—a young man of commercial aspect, but wonderfully gifted as a reader, all things conspiring to put before his audience a drama of actors and visible scenery. Last and not least, a man who was touched with the feeling of a poet's infirmities, ROBERT COLLYER, who, somewhere in the vast city, lived in a modest brick house, no butler to guard his door, no card or password necessary to greet him; the hale, sturdy yeoman with hair white as snow and cheeks ruddy as summer apples.

While friends and the press were rejoicing, the first edition of another book was being exhausted, the poet's third volume, "the darling of the list," it was thought then as many think to-day. This was the book that kept Lowell awake till two in the morning. "I have been at work on a book," Riley said to a friend in October, 1887; "if it proves successful I shall be the happiest little man in the world—for I have been long under the harrow." "A beautiful book in press," he wrote Mrs. Catherwood, "dedicated to my mother, 160 pages of *puore* poetry." "Want to talk with you a few weeks," he wrote Robert McIntyre, "but of course can do nothing of the kind. Up and at it as fast as a Mussulman's screech and new rhymes can wobble into ranks. Am writing better stuff than ever, with my best book now in hands of publishers. Thousands

of 'em sold and the money purt-nigh right in my pocket—and out again. We call the volume *Afterwhiles.*"

It *was* pure poetry, although Riley sometimes feigned to dislike it. As Hamlin Garland said at the time, the volume was unique in American literature. Never before had such simple, genuine expression been given in verse to homely things.

Nye entreated Riley not to forget the East in the first glow of the wonderful *Afterwhiles.* "The book does not weigh half a pound," he wrote for the New York *World,* "but it ought not to be judged by that. Here are thoughts that have floated about in everybody's head. It is a pleasing task to make two smiles where one grew—so I am told—but to do it in such a way as to retain self-respect and leave the reader in the same condition, to purify a man's moral system by letting the daylight and ozone of laughter into his damp and dismal soul, to make folly appear foolish and make humor do something besides draw its salary, ought to be considered a laudable ambition. Riley has done this. He has made music with the homely chords of Hoosierdom, made it with the zeal of an artist and the love of a patriot."

Afterwhiles marks a closer and a more remunerative relation between the poet and the book market, for which he was ever grateful and always indebted to his brother-in-law, Henry Eitel. The impression was abroad—and there was ground for it—that the poet knew about as much about business as an Australian kangaroo knows about *The Iliad.* He had printed his poems in the Indianapolis *Journal* and *Herald,* and other periodicals; but how "in the name

of the Saints" could he recover them? Original manuscripts were stored away in musty trunks, which he could not find, or, if he could, he had not the patience or the heart to go through. Who would collect them? Who would search scrap-books and the newspaper files? This his brother-in-law did—assisted by Mrs. Eitel and a secretary. After four or five months of patient, faithful work, the large stock of poems was accumulated for book publication.

Since the Park Theater Benefit (1879) Riley's public appearance in Indianapolis had been known as "his annual entertainment." As actor and speaker he had improved each year, without sacrificing his originality—the special mark which distinguished him from other entertainers. Each year he had been received with enthusiasm. After the New York reception the Indiana capital thought the poet had earned another "testimony of its admiration," and this it gave at the Grand Opera House in January, 1888.

It was an evening for public celebration—the poet had been accepted by the authorities in literature. Elijah W. Halford of the Indianapolis *Journal* presided, and in an interesting address briefly sketched the poet's life. "In looking over this magnificent audience," he said, introducing Riley, "I am impressed with the fact that there is at least one conspicuous difference between a prophet and a poet. While a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, a poet—our poet—may well felicitate himself that he is most esteemed and admired where best known, and that it is amongst his friends and neighbors, in the state of his birth and the city of his home, that the

warmest need of recognition and welcome awaits him."

Mr. Riley recited the three selections he had given in New York, together with other verses more familiar to the home audience. Then followed the new poem, "The Old Man and Jim," and part of the prose sketch, "The Boy From Zeeny."

Near the end of the program the audience had its first vision of "Little Orphant Annie" as she appeared before the footlights. She was "deliciously" introduced by the poet, who told of his first vision of her in his boyhood, when the slender wisp of a girl, clad in black and a summer hat came one cold winter day to the old Riley homestead—and when he had finished, his hearers were quite familiar with her elfish ways and the goblins that'll get you ef you don't watch out.

He closed, modestly, without a word about his New York success. Indeed his modesty was always a passport to the love and applause of the audience. "I desire to thank you," he said, bidding his hearers good night, "for the warm interest in my career, and for the great help and encouragement you have been to me. I can make no return except to express my heartfelt gratitude and cherish as long as life lasts the remembrance of the good that has come to me through my friends."

While all rejoiced over the Indianapolis testimonial, there was a feeling that it should have been wider in its scope, should be the homage of the Central West, and this feeling was crystallized by the Western Association of Writers at a dinner in the poet's honor at the Denison Hotel, Indianapolis, in October. One smiles in this year of grace, 1922, with such names on

the scroll of international fame as Ade, Nicholson, Tarkington, McCutcheon, Mrs. Porter and many others, that the new writers of that generation, the year, 1888, should have been so deeply concerned about the place of Indiana in American literature. But so they were.

The W. A. W., dubbed the "Writers' Singing Bee," had been organized a year or so before, and many years after 1888 met annually at Winona, Indiana. The Denison parlor in which the Association spread its banquet was beautifully decorated and forty guests, including many writers, flanked the poet on either side the banquet table. Benjamin S. Parker, president of the Association, gave a sketch of the growth of western literature. Honorable William Dudley Foulke was the toastmaster of the evening.

In response to the toast "Our Guest," Riley could but feebly convey the full sense of his gratitude. "The honor you so generously bestow," he said, "is so munificent that, in comparison, my deserving seems to me a very trivial consideration; so that, while grateful beyond all definition, I am no less pathetically reminded of my present unworthiness, and the accompanying fear that even the most generous future may, in that regard, still find me a delinquent. Therefore, with more loyalty than language and more tears than wine—God bless us every one!"

Mrs. M. L. Andrews, secretary of the W. A. W., read letters from absent friends. Having been nominated for President of the United States, Benjamin Harrison could not attend the banquet, but the Association understood that, in case of his election, Riley should be chosen Poet Laureate of America.

The letters were cordial to an inspiring degree. "I drink to the health of James Whitcomb Riley at home," wrote James Boyle O'Reilly, "and I will ponder on the fact that a man can rise in Indianapolis a thousand miles from Boston, and strike a literary note that the whole country turns its ear to hear." Many other letters from eastern authors were written in the same spirit. Three are quoted:

New York, October 18, 1888.

Mrs. M. L. Andrews, Indianapolis, Indiana.

Dear Friend:

The time is past when anybody can attract attention by admiring James Whitcomb Riley. It is getting too general everywhere. But the wild and woolly Westerns who began to set a heap by him when he had not yet caught the eye of the speaker, now that no geographical or isothermal lines—I use the word isothermal because it is euphonious and can certainly do no harm at this time when we are all acquainted—I say now that no geographical or isothermal lines pretend to bound his just fame, we who knew him early may be seen at this moment to swell with pardonable pride.

Looking over the career of James Whitcomb Riley, and carefully examining the difficult and dangerous route through which he has passed, I am amazed that a man who knows so little about how to get anywhere on earth should have got there so early. I can not fully understand it yet. Certainly Mr. Riley moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.

I unite with you all in the warmest expression of regard possible for your guest, and proceed at once to regret my physical inability to be with you in fact as I am in wish, to-night.

Sincerely yours,

EDGAR WILSON NYE.

Hartford, October 3, 1888.

Mr. W. D. Foulke and Others:

Dear Sirs and Misses—For the sake of the strong love and admiration which I feel for Riley, I would go if I could, were there even no way but by slow freight, but I am finishing a book begun three years ago. I see land ahead; if I stick to the oar without intermission I shall be at anchor in thirty days; if I stop to moisten my hands I am gone. So I send Riley half of my heart, and Nye the other half, if he is there, and the rest of me will stay regretfully behind to continue business at the old stand.

Truly yours,

S. L. CLEMENS.

Ashfield, Massachusetts, October 5, 1888.

Dear Madam:

I am sincerely sorry that I am unable to accept your kind invitation to the dinner in honor of Mr. Riley, a delightful and friendly project which you may be sure that I shall not reveal. I was greatly impressed by the power of Mr. Riley over an audience when I heard him with sympathy and admiration at the Authors' Readings last year in New York, and the tender pathos and natural humor of his verse had already marked him as a true poet of the people. He will be an interpreter of that Western American life which has other aspects and interests than those which are generally familiar. Its spirit, we all know as enterprise, energy and generosity. But he shows us that it is also beauty and grace and human sympathy. I join with all my heart in wishing him ever-increasing success, and with most friendly regard, I am,

Very truly yours,

GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.

A pleasant feature of the banquet was the presentation to Riley of a mask of the head of John Keats, the

gift of the *Century Magazine*. "Then the party broke up wishing the poet health, wealth and prosperity."

"My dear Man," wrote Joel Chandler Harris from the Atlanta *Constitution*, "did I not tell you that you were the Coming Man? Now that you have really come, I send you congratulations, together with the love of your faithful Uncle Remus."

Going immediately to lecture engagements, Riley had not then the time to reply to congratulations, but his answer to the editor of the New York *Sun* could not be delayed. Already the *Sun* was thinking of Riley as a national poet—"one who is read and appreciated by persons representing all classes of a community without distinction of education or social sympathies." Later the *Sun* affirmed that Riley came "nearer than any other American maker of verse to meeting the definition." Riley's answer was dated—

Buffalo, New York, October 22, 1888.

Mr. Charles A. Dana.
Dear Sir and friend:

A recent letter from you to literary friends at home did me such honor that I am at utter loss to thank you fittingly. Your good comment I would rather have than fine gold; so it is that, although a very *wealthy* man is now addressing you, he still remains too poor in speech to pay you a tithe of his gratitude. Simply you must know that your expressed confidence and interest in my effort strengthens and makes better my resolve to righteously deserve it. Steadily ahead too will I move in quest always of the way wherein I hope to find your approbation.

Faithfully and gratefully yours,
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

In past years "there had been hours," Riley said, "when life seemed stark as a granary floor, and the mist-bedrizzled moon came crawling to me like a sickly child." So far as those hours related to literary recognition, they had passed away. He had been admitted to the magic circle of the world's recognized men of genius. The sable cloud had turned its "silver lining to the night."

CHAPTER XIII

THE UNIQUE COMBINATION

THIS alliance, known to the lecture platform as the Nye-Riley Combination, had its beginning in 1886. Prior to that time there had been joint meetings but they had been informal. Authors' readings were the rage. A year before Mark Twain and George Cable had swung round the circuit together and the tour had been popular and financially successful.

The formal opening, at Indianapolis, in February, was a triple entertainment, the third "funny man" being Eugene Field, then the humorist of the Chicago *News*. As was expected the three-star bill drew a full house; "packed it," Robert Burdette said, "until people began to fall out of the windows." A more delighted audience never laughed its approval. Aside from the regular numbers—Nye in the "Cow Phenomenon," and "Robust Cyclones"; Field in the "Romance of a Waterbury Watch"; and Riley in "Deer Crick" and "Fessler's Bees"—there was considerable sparring among the participants, which keyed the audience to the G string of enjoyment. According to the program the order of appearance was Nye, Field and Riley, but when the curtain rang up Riley came forward first. "I desire to make a brief statement," he said, "concerning my friend from Wisconsin. He is the victim of an hereditary affliction, which makes him morbidly

sensitive. When the audience laughs he is not always certain whether they are laughing at his humor or his physical defect, and thus he is humiliated and embarrassed, sometimes to the extent of forgetting his lines. Out of consideration for his feelings I therefore ask the audience to refrain from laughing while he recites his piece. I will add that his affliction is a slight tendency to premature baldness."

Riley retired and, according to Burdette, the audience put on a decorous, sympathetic look when Nye came on making his first bow to an Indiana congregation. "He was bald as a brickyard. The house gasped and then incontinently roared." When he could command silence, Nye said that Riley had summoned him to Indianapolis by telegram, a compliment indeed and he was glad to come. As the entertainment proceeded, he explained, the audience would observe that he and Field would be in view on the stage at the same time, but he and Riley would *not* appear at the same time. The separate appearance of himself and the Hoosier "star" was explained in the Riley telegram, which with the permission of the audience Nye would read: *Edgar W. Nye—Come and appear at my reception. Be sure to bring a dress suit. P. S. Don't forget the trousers. I have a pair of suspenders.* "For a moment," said Burdette, "the jest hung fire. Then somebody tittered, the fuze sizzled through the boxes, down the aisle, and then up into the gallery."

The Combination thus auspiciously launched with Field's blessings, went forth to take its place in the amusement world as "the Rarest of All Humorous Novelties." The first season the attendance was not always so large that "people fell out of the windows."

One ugly night there was a sparse congregation in Danville, Illinois. In deference to Nye there was no "brass band music." He had had rough treatment enough, he said, having been picked up by a Manitoba simoon and thrown across a township.

Later in the evening he said he had been studying zoology down in the North Carolina mountains. There he had discovered a cow, hitched to a vehicle—"the most versatile and ambidextrous of the species," he said, "if I may be allowed to use a term that is so far above my station in life. To see that cow descending a steep mountain road at a rapid gait and striving in her poor weak manner to keep out of the way of a small Jackson Democratic wagon loaded with tobacco was a sight that would stir society to its borders."

When the humorists first came out on the stage, some doubt existed as to their ability to entertain. Nye was not graceful owing to "his height and longitude," and Riley seemed embarrassed in "not knowing what to do with his hands." But it wasn't long before the little congregation began to shout for joy and so continued until the resources for shouting were exhausted.

Ten days later, in Ohio, their way fairly streamed with success. In a letter to Hitt, Riley ran to extravagance about it:

Cleveland, Ohio, March 6, 1886.

Dear George:

Last night we bagged the town—a success not even second to our Indianapolis ovation. Nye is simply superb on the stage—and no newspaper report can half-way reproduce either the curious charm of his drollery—his improvisations—inspirations and so

THE POET AND HIS DEVOTED FRIEND, JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS

From a Portrait of the Poet by His Life-long Friend, T. C. Steele

forth. At times his auditors are hysterical with delight. We repeat to-night by special request of everybody. Newspapers all sent reporters, quite an audience in themselves, as they sat in betabled phalanx in the orchestra-pen, and laughed and whooped and yelled and cried, wholly oblivious of their duty half the time.

As ever, J. W. R.

To another intimate Riley wrote that he was on the road constantly, and working between trains like a pack horse. March thirtieth he wrote as follows: "Just home from a long but very successful trip about the country. With Nye for company the trials of travel are lessened till now I am almost content with what seems my principal mission here on earth, i. e., to spread over and run all around it like a ringworm."

Nye also discovered traits in the Hoosier Poet with which the public was unfamiliar. "Many who know Riley by his poems," he wrote for an eastern paper, "have a very erroneous idea of his personality. He is a thorough boy with those whom he knows and knows well. Many people believe themselves to be quite intimate with him who really know nothing of him at all. Those who are most free to approach him and lean upon him and confide in him, sometimes go away with a wrong impression. Nothing freezes him up sooner than the fresh and gurgling human pest who yearns to say he is intimate with some one who is well known, the curculio which builds its nest in the rind of another's reputation. Such a person would meet a cool and quiet little gentleman who would look out the window during the interview and lock the door after it had terminated; but a two-year-old child, with its

natural sincerity, would be knowing him at his best inside of ten minutes. Like most men who have learned to despise what is fraudulent and false, he flies to the unbought love of children."

The fall of 1886 was inauspicious for the Combination. "We started out," Riley said, "to chase our prospects over the globe," but soon Nye's health failed and he had to go south. In December Nye wrote Riley from North Carolina: "It is a queer country, but I think it has considerable timber for the ambition of a poet. Again and again I am tempted to emit a poem here, but so far have controlled myself. I shall think of you all by yourself provoking the laughter and tears of your audiences and yearning for a recess during which you can retire to the dressing-room and commune with the hired man."

In the spring of 1887 Nye had regained his health—"weighed," he said, "175 lbs. as the crow flies." Riley had been on the road through the winter. "Glad you are talking to them all the time," Nye wrote him, "though it is not so blasted pleasant to roam over the land all by yourself, studying time tables when you want to read other things, and creeping in through the back way to the stage accompanied by an apprehensive man who is going to introduce you, and whose mouth is very, very dry, and you glide softly with him among mouldy scenes and decayed properties that smell like a haunted house. Oh, Sir, is it not joyous? Is it not fraught with merriment and chock-full of mirth?"

In August, Nye was glad to see "Nothin' To Say" in the magazine—"but cold type!" how different it was from "the delightful, pathetic simplicity" Riley gave the poem on the platform. "I tell the people of the

World," Nye wrote, "that I would go farther to hear you than any other man who treads the boards."

After lecturing steadily for a half-year, Riley spent the summer at Greenfield, Indiana, where he said he could "nestle in memories of Mother Goose and hear the jingles of infancy." "You would be surprised to see how well I look," he wrote a friend, "and how really well I am. Somehow or other I just won't die —can't understand it. What would you advise?— Marriage, or more Poetry?"

In the autumn Nye appeared alone on the New England circuit, and afterward wrote Riley, "I wore a plug hat, but conversed freely with the common people. Everywhere I went I was received with passionate reserve and shown the public schools and the mean temperature."

From town to town Riley was flitting through Ohio and Indiana, at fifty dollars a night. February 15 (1888) he and Nye were together in Chicago for a second benefit for the Press Club. The papers next day featured the program as two hours of solid enjoyment. There were such captions and lines as—Big Grins at Central Music Hall—The Hoosier Poet and the Unforgiven Humorist Torture an Immense Audience—Nye Tickles Them—Riley Makes a Hit—The Poet and His "Lyre" Send Home an Audience of Aching Sides and Tear-Dimmed Eyes.

Nye and Riley were each on the program for three selections but the encores trebled the number. In substance and in part (with parenthetical notes on the applause inserted afterward by Nye) the press report was as follows: The two gentlemen appeared before the public in full-dress suits—and their bright-

est witticisms. Riley stepped from the waiting-room in a businesslike manner that contrasted widely with his delightful poetry, and almost before the audience knew it he was down where the footlights ought to be. Everybody applauded and again and again his bow had to be repeated. When quiet was restored he gave a piece of homely, wholesome advice to the man who is always finding fault with the weather. His hearers had read his poem, but they had not fully grasped the truth concealed under the garb of simple language. They had another and more delicately beautiful version of it when it came from its author's lips. At its conclusion after a storm of applause, he told the story of an old patriot and his soldier son ("The Old Man and Jim") which gave the audience a sense of grief seldom experienced before. The poet saw in the sea of faces a "suspicious glistening" of the eyes.

Then Nye stole out past the grand piano (upheaval of popular opinion). When he reached the middle of the stage he stopped to remove his eyeglasses and smile (applause while the speaker blushed). "It affords me pleasure," he began, "to play a return engagement for the Chicago Press Club (renewed applause). I have a great reverence for the press. It is a great engine of destruction (demonstration). I often think of what might have been the fate of many great men without the press. Take me for example, or Lydia E. Pinkham for instance (tittering and cackling). I suppose I should have made the opening speech but Mr. Riley kindly relieved me of that onerous duty; so I can get down to business. Poets as you probably know have throughout history been accompanied by their lyres (laughter). Riley appears

before you to-night as the poet; I suppose he has his lyre; if not I am with him (redoubled laughter while the speaker caresses the bald spot on his head). I asked a man while riding into a city the other day if he had heard my last lecture. He said he hoped he had (giggling). So I am getting up a new lecture in which I can reel off humor by the yard. Horace Greeley says that a lecture is successful when more remain in the hall than go out. I have talked with some of my friends about it and they suggest that I get a brass band to play half an hour before it and half an hour after. One critic says I would make a hit if the band played through the whole lecture." (Gas flickers and rafters shake.)

Then Riley took the audience to the banks of Deer Creek and while there told them about the woman who swallowed a tree toad. Later he bade his hearers good night in his "peroration on the peanut."

In his last number Nye sketched a southerner "with a lambrequin fringe under the chin," and then crowned the success of the evening with the story of a Swedish dog "with whom he had been associated on the plains." And so the program "came to a merry end and the audience laughed themselves into the street."

There were other engagements in the neighborhood of Chicago. After the entertainment at South Bend, Indiana, a local poet, riding home on a street-car, expressed his joy in rhyme:

"Nye and Riley, Riley and Nye:
Grin and chuckle, sob and sigh!
Never had such fun by half,
Knew not whether to cry or laugh.

Jest and joke and preach and sing,
They can do most anything—
Make you laugh or make you cry—
Dear old Riley! Rare Bill Nye!"

In April, Riley made his second appearance in Chickering Hall, New York, this time at a testimonial performance to the veteran manager, Major James B. Pond. Besides Nye and Riley, George W. Cable and Max O'Rell were on the program. "I shall never forget the first time I saw Riley," the celebrated Frenchman wrote afterward in his *American Notes*. "He made an impression upon me such as no other man has done. It was at a banquet in New York, given by Augustin Daly, in honor of Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, at the close of their season in America. There were many eloquent speeches and toasts made that night, for the party was a brilliant one. I remember little about them now however as only one impressed me, I may say. That was a plain, homely-looking man, who on a simple announcement arose and recited 'Out to Old Aunt Mary's.' I acknowledge that I am rather callous. I surprised myself before that man had finished his recitation by finding tears coursing down my cheeks. Before he concluded there was a moisture in the eyes of every one present. Ellen Terry, a queen in her sympathies, was almost overcome with emotion. That was the first time I heard James Whitcomb Riley, and I can understand why Americans love him."

In the autumn Riley joined his colleague in the *World* office, where arrangements were completed for a tour on a comprehensive scale, under the management of Major Pond. Before reaching New York

Riley wrote Nye as follows: "Soon hope to open up entire budget and hear your well-beloved chortle. Simply, what suits you suits me. I am so impatient to be in the hands of those who will protect me from myself. I would not travel a mile and three-quarters alone, in any direction, either in or out of a Railway guide, for any money on earth, were I not compelled to. Soon I will moisten my hands and pray that I may be utterly emancipated from all the ache and cark and care of the one-man-show business. Then only will I be supremely blessed, and at peace with God and man."

For the first time Riley remained long enough in New York to become a familiar figure on Broadway. Enveloped in his large overcoat he made a picturesque appearance. Strangers took notice of his Roman nose and his blue eyes alight with merriment. He did not wear long poetic locks; so that it was said, when he removed his hat, the phrenological bumps on his head were as conspicuous as wax figures in a museum.

It was rumored, absurdly, that he was writing a series of letters on politics. He had recently voted for Harrison and had participated in the wild demonstrations in Indianapolis over the General's election. "No, I am not in New York to write on politics," he replied to reporters. "Bill Nye and I start out to-night at Poughkeepsie on a reading-talking tour. He talks and I read—read my own poems, not because they are better than others but because I know them better. We are booked for the whole season. We shall cruise about in this vicinity for a time and then go south."

Up to that time the Nye-Riley tour was the most extensive ever spread upon the American map by the

Pond Bureau, reaching in time from November to May, and in place from Montgomery, Alabama, to Minneapolis, and from Boston to Portland, Oregon. The tour was to end in Canada.

The fourth appearance happened to be an afternoon engagement (November 15), a Benefit for the Actors' Fund, at the Broadway Theater, New York, in which Nye and Riley took their places with others in a variety program—a gathering of the stars of the profession. Here Riley heard Booth and Barrett in the fifth act of *Julius Caesar*. Denman Thompson occupied a box with his family, as did Mary Anderson also, surrounded by a number of beautiful young women. Altogether it was a famous afternoon.

Two days later the combination appeared before and to the delight of the fun-loving public of Washington. Nye's dog story and Riley's bear story were the most amusing yarns that had been told in the capital since the days of Artemus Ward.

When the poet reached Hampton Roads he found time to write William Carey of the *Century*:

Norfolk, Virginia, November 24, 1888.

Dear Carey:

In the rush and whirl of business I think it will give you a gasp of rest to know that Nye and I are junketing along the road. So far our experiences have been delightful. At Richmond we missed Nelson Page, but met such a chorus of his friends as to make the visit a most memorable event. Were shown the beautiful old city "from Genesis to the Day of Judgment." Called at "Washington's headquarters," but found the gentleman absent, while the cherry tree that he had planted still flourished and went on being lied about with never a lisp or whisper of reproach. Saw

General Lee's recumbent figure laid in matchless marble rest, and Valentine whose lulling chisel smoothed the eyelids down and kissed each feature to its white repose. Three or four different times I managed to shake the sculptor's hand. Things like that help a fellow whose temperament is not exactly plumb on every side.

As Ever,
JAMES POPCORN RILEY.

At Macon, Georgia, in the Lanier House, Riley completed "The Old Soldier's Story," while Nye, to please the local committee, was riding over rough roads, listening to stories badly told and seeing things for the "first time" he had seen many times before. Since leaving New York Riley had ridden and lunched and dined with committees until he was beginning to look and feel like a shadow on the scenery. He had therefore declined to accompany the committee in Macon.

"When we went down to dinner," said Riley, "I made up my mind I would tell Nye another stale story, such a story as I knew he had been feeding on that afternoon. I had, unbeknown to him, been rehearsing the story for several days. I began to tell him as earnestly as though it was newer than the hour, the oldest story I ever heard. I heard a clown tell it in the Robinson and Lake Circus when I was a boy, and the first eternity only knows how old it had to be before a clown would be allowed to use it. Nye heard it long before he ever heard me tell it—the old man's story of the soldier carrying his wounded comrade off the battle-field. Well, I dragged the story out as long as I could, just to weary Nye; told it in the forgetful fashion of an old man with confused memory; told the

point two or three times before I came to it; went back again to pick up dropped stitches in the web; wandered and maundered, made it as long and dreary as I knew how. Nye received the narrative with convulsions of merriment. He choked over his meat and drink until he quit trying to eat and just listened, giggled, chuckled and roared. He declared it was the best thing he had ever heard me do and insisted that I put it in our program. This, at first, I declined to do, but Nye was so earnest, so persistent about it, that a week later, at Louisville, Kentucky, I think it was, I told the story to a thousand people. In theatrical parlance, the galleries fell, the house went wild and I had to tell it again."

A paragraph set down in the fashion of the old story-teller, gives a faint idea of the way Riley told it:

"I heerd an awful funny thing the other day—I don't know whether I kin git it off er not, but, anyhow, I'll tell it to you. Well!—Le's see now how the fool-thing goes. Oh, yes!—W'y, there was a feller one time—it was durin' the army and this feller that I started in to tell you about was in the—war—and—there was a big fight a-goin' on, and this feller was in the fight—and—it was a big battle and bullets a-flyin' ever' which way, and bombshells a-bu'stin', and cannon balls a-flyin' 'round promiskus; and this feller right in the midst of it, you know, and all excited and het up, and chargin' away; and—and the fust thing you know along come a cannon ball and shot his head off—Hold on here a minute! No, sir; I'm a-gittin' ahead of my story; no, no; didn't shoot his *head* off—I'm gittin' the cart before the horse there—shot his *leg* off; that was the way; *shot his leg off*"; (and so on).

To listen to the story as many elocutionists, after hearing Riley, have tried to tell it, is an affliction which no audience should have to suffer. The ha-ha-ing of the old story-teller, his delicious hesitations, his hearty chuckles and bewitching bits of laughter as he proceeded—the art of telling it as the poet told it was lost forever in his passing.

Three months after Riley told the story in Louisville, Mark Twain heard him tell it to three thousand people in Tremont Temple, Boston. What Twain's impressions of it were, he has told in his delightful chapter, "How To Tell A Story": He writes in part:

"In comic-story form the story is not worth the telling. Put into the humorous-story form it takes ten minutes, and is about the funniest thing I ever listened to—as James Whitcomb Riley tells it.

"He tells it in the character of a dull-witted old farmer who has just heard it for the first time, who is innocent and happy and pleased with himself, and has to stop every little while to hold himself in and keep from laughing outright; and does hold in, but his body quakes in a jelly-like way with interior chuckles; and at the end of the ten minutes the audience have laughed until they are exhausted, and the tears are running down their faces.

"The simplicity and innocence and sincerity and unconsciousness of the old farmer are perfectly simulated, and the result is a performance which is thoroughly charming and delicious. This is art—and fine and beautiful, and only a master can compass it; but a *machine* could tell the other story."

In December Nye and Riley came from a week in Ohio to the Grand Opera House, Indianapolis. Indi-

ana had just celebrated the seventy-second anniversary of her admission into the Union, and marked the occasion of the first general use of Riley's poems in the exercises of the public schools. Riley had been absent for some time and the city was eager to give him and Nye another overflowing welcome, which it did, President-elect Harrison being among the most appreciative of the large audience.

From the day they began touring together, Nye and Riley had been coaching each other in voice, gesture, posture, and so forth, that they might be at their best before the footlights. Each gladly accepted the other's instructions. There was one friend, however, whose criticism at that time, in Riley's opinion, was unsurpassed. He had been helpful from the very beginning of the poet's platform experience. His last word on the subject was written the morning after this Indianapolis appearance.

Indianapolis, December 12, 1889.

My dear Riley:

I was at your performance last night and "I never laughed so since the Thayers were hung," as Artemus Ward used to say. Only in one or two points did it seem to me that you could enhance your program, and in these my sense may be at fault. You will forgive me then if I point out what might be, as I see it, an improvement. I am as jealous of your fame as if you belonged to me only, instead of the public. Make your own carriage and utterances as dissimilar as possible from those you assume in the character you illustrate. For instance, the embarrassed caressing of your lips with your hand is inimitable. Be careful not to do it when you come on the rostrum as Whitcomb Riley. It is next thing to scratching your head

or blowing your nose. Avoid any trick of eye or gesture that you are to use in caricature or personation. Commit thoroughly any little speech or preface you have to make. This is a vital point. Make it clear that Riley in person is equal in dignity, poise and breeding to any in the audience. It is Riley the artist who commands laughter, pity, cheers and tears.

Take this from an old friend—one mean enough to be your stepfather before he takes a step farther. My health steadily declines but "I smile on you now as of old."

Your faithful friend,
DAN PAINE.

Ten years before, in his poem, "Dan Paine," Riley had expressed his gratitude to this patron of letters on the Indianapolis *News*. Often, when he sat "in gloomy fellowship with care," his heart leaped with warm emotions to greet the friend who came to assure him of success:

"A something gentle in thy mien,
A something tender in thy voice,
Has made my trouble so serene,
I can but weep, from very choice.
And even then my tears, I guess,
Hold more of sweet than bitterness,
And more of gleaming shine than rain,
Because of thy bright smile, Dan Paine.

"The wrinkles that the years have spun
And tangled round thy tawny face,
Are kinked with laughter, every one,
And fashioned in a mirthful grace.
And though the twinkle of thine eyes
Is keen as frost when Summer dies,
It can not long as frost remain
While thy warm soul shines out, Dan Paine."

The combination had opened the year 1889 in New York State. Then it had swung westward again through Indiana, and onward to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. February came with a date at Madison, Wisconsin, and by the end of the month the attraction had returned to the Atlantic seaboard. Along the way there had been correspondence to the effect that "this is a poor lecture town but we think Nye and Riley would draw." To annul any false impression about the "inimitable pair," a circular was widely circulated explaining that the "symposium" was *not a lecture.* Those who failed to buy tickets would miss an excellent chance to add length to their days. The program for Springfield, Massachusetts, suggests the character of the entertainment in other cities:

Gilmore's Opera House,
Springfield, Mass., February 26, 1889.

NYE AND RILEY

Programme

I.	SIMPLY A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE	Bill Nye
II.	STUDIES IN HOOSIER DIALECT	James Whitcomb Riley
III.	AT THIS POINT MR. NYE WILL INTERFERE WITH AN ANECDOTE	Bill Nye
IV.	THE POETRY OF COMMONPLACE	James Whitcomb Riley
V.	ONE OF THE AUTHOR'S LITERARY GEMS, GIVEN WITHOUT NOTES AND NO GESTURES TO SPEAK OF	Bill Nye
VI.	CHARACTER SKETCH	James Whitcomb Riley
VII.	A STORY FROM SIMPLE LIFE	Bill Nye

VIII.	CHILD ECCENTRICITIES	James Whitcomb Riley
IX.	SOMETHING ELSE	Bill Nye
X.	THE EDUCATOR	James Whitcomb Riley

In March the management mailed tc cities ahead another large show bill, giving the report of the combination's harvest in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. In the center of the bill was the famous cartoon by Walter McDougall, the artist of the New York *World*—Nye sitting astride an elephant's neck, with fan in hand and his plug hat on the elephant's brow; Riley under an umbrella, with a book of poems in his hands, sitting in a chair on the elephant's back; and a broad streamer on the elephant's side—THE GREAT NYE AND RILEY COMBINED MORAL SHOW—and Major Pond leading the "show" with a little rope tied to the elephant's trunk.

There was every prospect of a successful season in the mountain region and the Pacific slope, but in April the tour suddenly ended at Kansas City, owing to illness in Nye's family. The combination was worn out by the trials of the road—every week-day night as Nye said, and sometimes a matinée, or a "sacred concert" on Sunday. "I am tired of making a holy show of myself. This is the business," he added, "that makes a man want to take a swift horse, a zealous bird dog and an improved double-barrel duck destroyer and commune with nature."

"I am not writing any thing now," Riley said to a Kansas City reporter. "When this engagement is over I want to hunt some big, lonely grave, crawl into it and pull the green covering over me for a dead-earnest rest."

The interviews, copied quite generally throughout the country, afforded the press opportunity to "strike a blow for literary freedom," and in some sections it proceeded to do so. "It is fortunate," said the Rochester *Chronicle,* "that the dates for the two gentlemen have been cancelled. Certainly the reputation of neither has been enhanced and the literary work which they have attempted to do in their travels, writing at hotels or on the cars, has been of a character decidedly inferior."

"It has never seemed to us becoming or advantageous," said the Pittsburgh *Dispatch,* "for authors of genuine ability to fritter away their time and strength upon the lecture stage. With a man of genius like Riley it is not necessary that he should make a circus of himself. He is known everywhere now; his work is universally admired, and there is a keen demand for more of his delicious lyrics. They are not forthcoming. Perhaps he will abandon the circus business and resume the pursuit of the Muse. Then everybody, the Muse included, will be happy."

In the face of these strong protests it is all the more surprising that a tour of thirty weeks was planned for 1889 and 1890, opening in Stamford, Connecticut, in October. As in the two previous seasons there was an abounding public interest in the "literary team." If the performance was better one place than another, possibly the favored cities were Detroit and Pittsburgh. In those centers the newspapers as well as the crowds fairly boiled over with enthusiasm, even the Pittsburgh *Dispatch* that a short while before had deplored the frittering away of time and strength on the lecture stage. "The screaming farce," said the

Dispatch, "was when everybody had left the hall and the janitor swooped around and gathered up a quart of buttons. Fun and merriment reigned in various stages the whole evening, principally the superlative stage. The faces of the audience in the different contortions that the excessive mirth produced, were a side-splitting study in themselves. The hall was taxed to the utmost to accommodate the laughingly shaking mass of humanity. Round after round and peal after peal of applause and laughter, greeted the humorists at every move, word and look."

There were changes here and there in the program but no marked difference from that of the previous season. Nye made a hit in "a literary gem," an original commencement day poem, written by Riley, entitled "The Autumn Leaves Is Falling"—

> "Lo! the autumn leaves is falling,
> Falling here and there—
> Falling in the atmosphere
> And likewise in the air."

To see Nye reading from a roll of manuscript ornamented with a blue ribbon, his trembling hands sustained and comforted by a pair of white cotton gloves bought expressly for the occasion, was "an offering," as he said, "that caused the audience to toss pansies, violets, potatoes, turnips and other tropical shrubs at the author." He would read one stanza and retire behind the curtain. After an uproar of laughter he would come forward with a second stanza and so on, sometimes answering four encores in that way. The audience could not get enough of "Autumn Leaves."

Riley touched his hearers deeply with the pathetic

story of an old shoemaker, "How Dutch Frank Found His Voice." Sentimental feelings were awakened by his recital of "Her Beautiful Hands," and fond recollections by his new poem, "The Old Band."

If there is any validity in the ancient belief that the disasters that befall men are occasioned by their towering prosperity and the frown of the gods upon it surely Nemesis was working industriously on the combination in January, 1890. Up to that time, praise from the public had been unstinted and continuous. Nye's bank account, according to Major Pond, had been swelling to the tune of one thousand dollars a week. Riley, as will be seen, had been less fortunate. The first week in January Nye suffered from la grippe and Riley from nervous prostration. When one was unable to face the footlights the other went through the program alone. Each day through the month Riley grew more apprehensive, more unhappy. Again the newspapers bemoaned his absence in the field of letters.

Looking back over the road Riley saw two new books, *Pipes O' Pan at Zekesbury,* and the beautiful *Old-Fashioned Roses,* the latter compiled chiefly from his other volumes, for publication in England. This was not so bad, but he saw also that since he and Nye had traveled together there had been truly a dearth of new verse. There were only two poems which gave him pleasure when he woke in the night, "two little shining summits," he said, "The Poet of the Future" and "'Mongst the Hills o' Somerset." The latter, begun in the Anderson Hotel, Pittsburgh, and finished on the train, had been suggested by the casual remark of an editor praising the beauty of the hills and nooks

of Somerset County, Pennsylvania, part of old Bedford County, where the poet's father and grandparents had lived before they came to Indiana.

Two "shining" poems in two seasons on the lecture platform! It had not been thus in the poetic prosperity of years gone by. Riley's heart sank within him, and as in other and previous periods of depression, he again became the victim of his dragon, his old-time foe, the *blue flame*. Friends wept, as Scotchmen wept for Burns, but, alas, the malady was not to be remedied by weeping.

Another cause, an immediate one, contributed to the dissolution of the combination. In April, 1885, Riley had signed a five-year contract with the Western Lyceum Agency, whereby its manager was to receive half the receipts. "With no more business sense than an oyster—a *cove* oyster," said Riley, "I signed the papers. In those days I believed implicitly in men. My faith and ignorance were such that had a man brought me my death warrant I would have signed it without reading, or had I read the thing I would not have comprehended it."

In due time came the season of prosperity, and Riley received four hundred dollars a week, fifty per cent. of which went to the agency. After the combination had become a bonanza, the terms were modified and the contract transferred to Major Pond. Riley was to receive sixty dollars a night, one-third of which was to be paid to the Western Agency, although it contributed but little to the great success. In the large cities the receipts were considerably more than one thousand dollars a night. In Chicago, for instance, there were sixteen hundred dollars at the second per-

formance within six weeks, "with five hundred people turned away from the door." Still Riley's share was the "paltry forty dollars." As time passed, this injustice became intolerable to him. He had not "the business sense of an oyster, but," as he said, "an oyster would know that that was not a square division of the profits." As a brilliant Indiana lawyer said, "The Western Agency sold the poet to Pond—sold James Whitcomb Riley into slavery. On the last tour, one of the most successful on the American stage, Riley received but a small fraction of the profits although he was giving half the show. We of Indiana tearfully regret the result, but it should not excite surprise that the poet, the victim of a malignant temptation, grew gloomy over the slavery and took to drink to drown his sorrow."

(Afterward in the days of his platform prosperity, he did not drown his sorrow in that way. He resisted the temptation. Again and again, at banquets and receptions,—"deceptions," he called them,—he and his manager were the only guests who turned the wine cup down.)

Determined to have "the pound of flesh," the manager of the Western Agency began to shadow the poet from city to city, a course that was as ill-advised as it was unforgivable. Once aware of this "Riley became," to quote Nye, "a wild, riotous, blazing, uncontrollable Vesuvius. That instant the combination began coasting toward the crash."

January, 1890, the partnership was dissolved, the tour that was to have embraced the cities of the plains, the Pacific coast and the British possessions coming abruptly to an end at Louisville, Kentucky.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BEAUTY OF FORGIVENESS

WHEN Riley woke from the night of despair at Louisville, his first thought was that he "would be neglected like a fallen skyrocket. The wind, a bleak, vindictive wind," he said, "had been blowing and sobbing till the icicles on the eaves looked dismal and weary. My faculties had been enchained. Furies, seen and unseen, seemed to be unwinding for me the skein of an awful destiny."

To all appearances it was indeed a frozen, desolate world and to Riley it seemed that he was the most unloved object in it. But within a week it was evident that his genius could not be obscured by his weakness. A man could make a mistake and still be a man. "The world," wrote Eugene Field, "will not suffer the beauty of Riley's work and the symmetry of his literary reputation to be ruthlessly shattered by the iconoclasm of his personal weakness."

A paraphrase of an old English greeting (the language of Pope) expresses the attitude of his Hoosier friends and neighbors toward the poet in that hour of his extremity: Welcome to your native soil! welcome to your friends, whether returned with honor and filled with agreeable hopes; or melancholy with dejection. If happy, we partake of your elevation; if unhappy, you still have a warm corner in our hearts.

Whatever you are and in whatever state you are we are with you.

"Between the cradle and the grave," remarked Eugene V. Debs to a circle of critics, "are dark blots resting on the cliffs of time, which we would sweep away if we could. But the blots are there. Let us be merciful that we may obtain mercy."

Before leaving Louisville Nye bade Riley an affectionate good-by. Certain reports, falsely attributed to him, but really emanating from the Western Lyceum Agency, had been going the rounds of the press. They were grossly exaggerated and painfully damaging. A few days after reaching New York, Nye was heard to say that he "would give the wealth of Indiana could the press recall them."

At first Riley was strongly disinclined to make any comment, but finally on his return to Indianapolis he said: "I have seen only the first reports and they shocked me so terribly that I have not had the courage to review any more of them. Soon the public will see the spirit of malice and anger and revenge which pervades them. They are their own condemnation.

"I am especially blest in the number of my warm friends. They need no explanation of these reports. One of the truest of them is Bill Nye. His fealty to me is beyond all question. We parted friends, as we have always been and always will be. He understands and I understand. We are wholly congenial, and a better, gentler man I never knew.

"I desire to stand before the public only as I am. My weaknesses are known, and I am willing for the world to judge whether in my life or writings there has been anything dishonorable. I do not say that in

this blight which has fallen on me, I am innocent of blame. I have been to some degree derelict and culpable. The whole affair is to be regretted and for the present I have to accept the responsibility.

"I have always been a firm believer in the doctrine that ruin, where undeserved, can be but temporary, and now I have an opportunity to see my belief tested. I do not desire to say anything harsh of anybody, and for the present, at least, am content to wait for better things. I am sustained by the renewed expressions of affection from my friends."

It seems fitting, now that the partnership has been dissolved, that Riley should have a further word about Nye. Always Nye was Joe and Riley was Pip of *Great Expectations*. ("Ever the best of friends; ain't us, Pip?") "The gentlest and cheeriest of men," said Riley. "Nye has the heart of a woman and the tenderness of a child. Always in good humor, never finicky, I could not imagine a more charming traveling companion. We were constantly playing practical jokes on each other or indulging in some mischievous banter before the audience. On one occasion, coming before the footlights for a word of general introduction, Mr. Nye said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, the entertainment to-night is of a dual nature. Mr. Riley and I will speak alternately. First I come out and talk until I get tired, then Mr. Riley comes out and talks until *you* get tired!' Thus the sallies and kickshaws bubbled merrily on, every night something new to spring on the audience. Besides I learned to know in Bill Nye a man blessed with as noble and heroic a heart as ever beat. But the making of trains, which were all in conspiracy to outwit me, schedule or

no schedule, and the rush and tyrannical pressure of inviolable engagements, some hundred to a season and from Boston to the Rocky Mountains, were a distress to my soul. Imagine yourself on a crowded day-long excursion; imagine that you had to ride all the way on the platform of the car; then imagine that you had to ride all the way back on the same platform; and lastly, try to imagine how you would feel if you did that every day of your life—and you will then get a glimmer—a faint glimmer—of how one feels after traveling about on a reading or lecturing tour."

After Riley's public statement, expressions of tenderness and faith were heard on every side. Letters and telegrams came from remote quarters of the country. The local spirit of good will crystallized in a reception to him given by the Indianapolis Literary Club, an association of gentlemen that included leading jurists, clergymen, lawyers, physicians and writers. It was the sentiment of the Club that Riley had shed luster on Indiana and would continue to do so.

Ladies and gentlemen both were present with guests from other cities of the state. The reception was intended to be a local one, but what happened crept on to the wires. It was good news and papers throughout the country printed it. "Whitcomb Riley," said the Chicago *Mail,* "remains king on his native heath, despite recent derogatory reports. The Indianapolis Literary Club has arranged to give him a reception, just by way of showing that Indiana takes no stock in the stories. In this age a poet is not without honor in his own corner of the world." "The people of Indianapolis," said the Kansas City *Star,* "have set an

example worthy of imitation. The Hoosier Poet returned to them a few days ago, and they received him gladly and resolved to stand by him. This is a lesson of fair treatment which should not go unheeded. It says to other communities, Go and do likewise."

Only those who have passed through a personal crisis, an overwhelming shadow, can know what Riley's feelings were when he faced his friends in the Indianapolis Literary Club. Ten years he had been associated with them. It seemed to him, he said after the reception, that the betrayal of his weakness had only strengthened their affection. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I can not find words to express my gratitude for this display of your confidence. I hope I shall not abuse it in the future as I have to some extent in the past. I shall hope the better to deserve it. I really can not thank you. I am bereft of language when I attempt it."

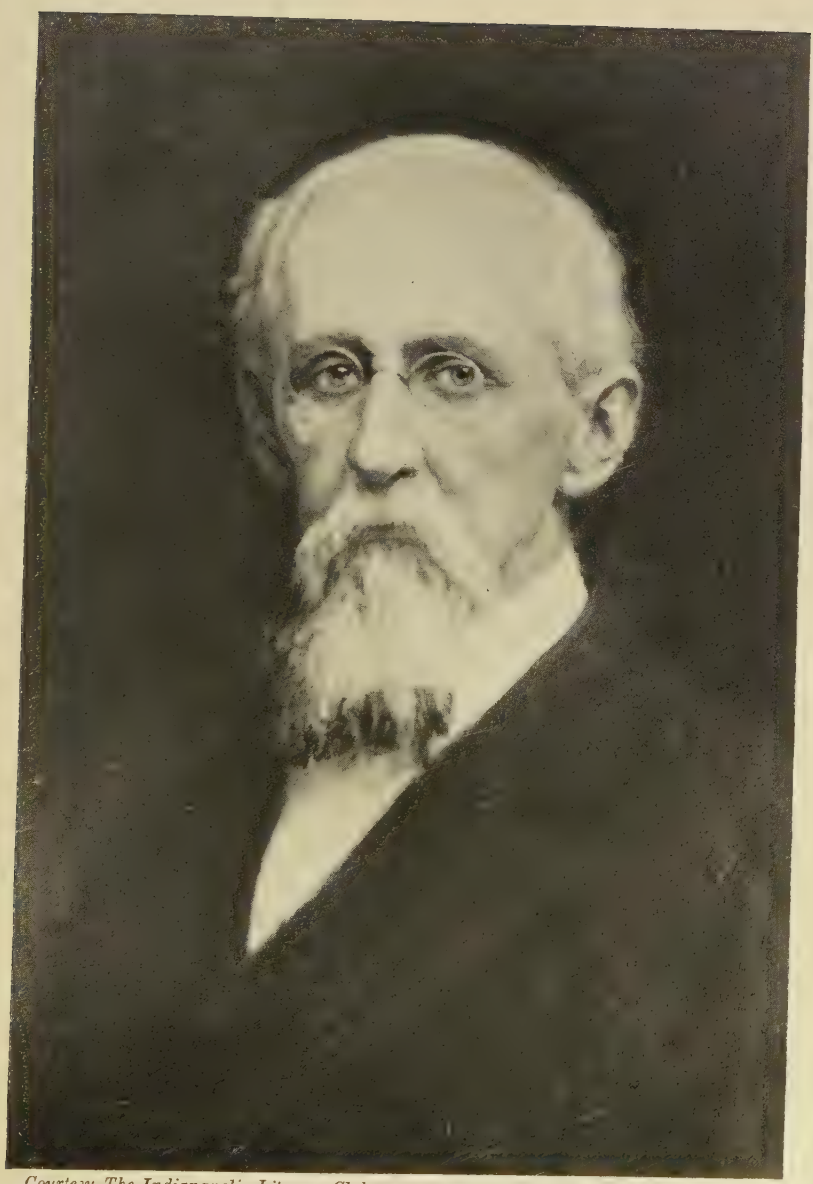
The Club did what it could to relieve the poet of grim recollections. His staunch lawyer friend, William P. Fishback, in a spicy speech claimed for lawyers kinship with the poets. Neither profession, he said, tolerated humbuggery and charlatanism. With sparkling wit he continued the comparison. Lastly he assured Riley of the Club's unbroken fealty. He was especially proud of the fact that Indiana knew Riley was a poet "long before Lowell, or Howells, or other pinnacles of intelligence in the East knew it."

Judge Livingstone Howland was most happy at the close of his remarks in his paraphrase of the line from Gray's "Elegy." He was on the program for an *obiter dictum*. "You may not know what that means," said the Judge. "Among lawyers it stands for some-

thing that is good for nothing as authority and entitled to no respect whatever. Therefore I do not feel any deep sense of responsibility for what I may say here to-night. Mr. Fishback has in his own bright way, placed poets and lawyers in conjunction, and sought to show how much good they have in common. He seems to have had a purpose in taking advantage of the present flood of popular feeling toward a poet (whom it is unnecessary to name) to lift our honorable profession above the level at which it has lately stood in the public estimation.

"Now I fear," continued the Judge, "that in the mind of the masses—the common run of people—the marked, distinguishing characteristic of our profession is a total disregard for truth; they, the multitude, think a lawyer will say whatever he is paid to say, will take it all back the next day, if better paid to do so, and cares nothing for the eternal verities. In plain, blunt speech, we are, to the common mind, professional liars. You have seen how my friend Fishback, one of the brightest and liveliest of the brotherhood, has been touched by the poet's wand, has been softened, opened, expanded, illuminated and transformed—his fine face glowing with feeling, his soul in ecstasy. To my mind no finer tribute has been paid Mr. Riley to-night than this single fact—this practical demonstration of his power. It sustains his title to poetic genius, his ability to exercise the highest function of true poesy—*to wake to ecstasy the living liar.*"

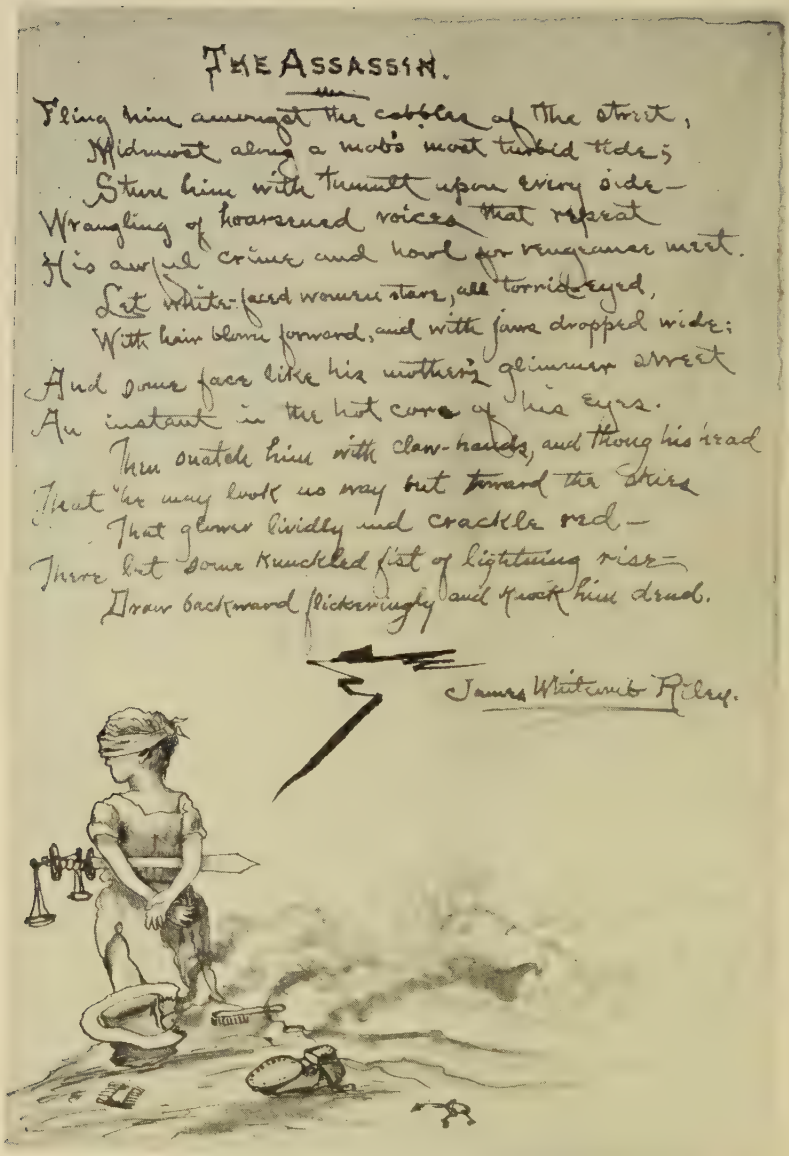
At the close of the reception Riley had been so reestablished in his own mind and so encouraged that he was persuaded to recite two selections—one, "Tradin' Joe," among the very earliest of his produc-



Courtesy The Indianapolis Literary Club

WILLIAM P. FISHBACK, "WHO WITH GREATEST ZEST SHARED WITH THE NEEDIEST"

From a portrait by T. C. Steele


THE ASSASSIN.
Fling him amongst the cobbles of the street,
Midmost along a mob's most turbid tide;
Stun him with tumult upon every side—
Wrangling of hoarsened voices that repeat
His awful crime and howl for vengeance meet.
Let white-faced women stare, all torrid-eyed,
With hair blown forward, and with jaws dropped wide;
And some face like his mother's glimmer sweet
An instant in the hot core of his eyes.
Then snatch him with claw-hands, and thong his head
That he may look no way but toward the skies
That glower lividly and crackle red—
Then let some knuckled fist of lightening rise—
Draw backward flickeringly and smack him dead.
James Whitcomb Riley.

FROM ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT WITH ILLUSTRATION. THE POEM WRITTEN ON THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT GARFIELD

tions; the other, his latest poem, "The Little Man in the Tin Shop."

Thus did the Hoosiers rally round their favorite son. Other cities did likewise. "How quickly," remarked a friend, "can a smile of God change the world." Soon Riley was the guest of the Blue Grass Club in Louisville, and the Glenarm Club in Denver. It was his first visit to the Far West. The reception was on an elaborate scale, arranged by Myron Reed. "The poet," said the preacher, "was the guest of the Rocky Mountains."

The evidence of affection in the messages Riley received would make a book. Especially loyal was his old comrade of the *Hawkeye*—"Always, always and always your friend, Robert J. Burdette." "Why should you promise a crowd of people that you will try 'to deserve their respect'?" he wrote. "You have not lost it. You have the profoundest respect of your friends. It has never wavered or faltered. And you are not going to lose it."

Riley had little to answer, except to suggest that there is at bottom a spirit of good in lost battles. An early fragment gave a glimpse of his feelings:

"The burdened heart is lighter
When the fault has been confessed,
And the day of life is brighter
When the good is manifest.

"So all the shadows looming
In the dusk shall fade away,
And sweetest flowers be blooming
In the furrows of decay."

Riley began bravely, hoping that he might in some extraordinary way answer all communications, but the task soon proved to be a hopeless one. A few letters reveal his gratitude as expressed in a hundred or more. "As to the recent disaster," he wrote Edward S. Van Zile of the New York *World*, "were I as pitiless as my assailant, I could far better defend myself than I have. As it is, I have never uttered his name, nor suffered it to be extorted by any skill or cunning of reporters—believing no wrong can so secretly hide itself away as not to be in happy time unearthed and its pelt nailed on the gable end of the barn, as our own dear Nye would doubtless put it. Give him my best love if you see him."

Riley was especially gracious in a letter to a stranger in Nebraska, one of the thousand unknown friends similarly tortured, who had "prayed God to be kind to the poet."

The New Denison,
Indianapolis, March 4, 1890.

Dear Sir and friend:

You have written a letter that does me good clean through. I am very proud of it, and shall treasure it among my rarest prizes and most goodly gifts. When you wrote that, I doubt not God was in your pleasant neighborhood. All you say was said of the best right, because righteously inspired. A sincere voice is never —can not be discordant. I thank you beyond words for the gracious utterance of every syllable.

Always and enduringly yours,
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

Indianapolis, February 9, 1890.

Dear Dan Paine:

Your letter was so jolly! I would rather have you at my funeral than my own folks, and hope you will

manage to be there. As to my present trouble, you have "sized" the situation exactly—as I knew you would. Some acquire "nagging"—Some have "nagging" thrust upon them. Till now I have been of the latter class, and in that line could almost "point to myself with pride." Next time, however, they will have to "down" me by some other process; and, amid the general wreck, it is pleasant, at least, to think the press of the United States and Canada have, along with other gratuitous information, been made acquainted with my fixed intent—the best one of my life.

Some very neighborly and wholesome reveries drop in on me now and then, and close the door softly after them, and sit down as of old, and gossip pleasantly in restful, once-in-a-while voices. The embers bloom, the clock ticks, and the kettle simmers, and a most gracious peace is mine once more. That is a pretty good condition, is it not, for a fellow, dear old man, compared with the eternal racket and worry and hurry of the world,—unvisited by any hint of rest—where one gropes through the cinders to his nightly berth, and tosses through the sullen watches, yawning and sighing like a leaky bellows, as he thinks of being hustled out again at dawn and thrusting his cold, relentless legs through a pair of trousers cold as candle moulds.

Soon as I am out again I am coming up to see you, and, in return, to chirk you up a little. To show you, by comparison, that being shut in all the time, as you have been, is even better fare than mine in the "free air," "the wild, rapturous rush of the chase," and the ever-beckoning bobtail of the nimble nickel as he "vanishes away" in the dim dark distance.

As ever your affectionate and grateful friend,

J. W. Riley.

"If Riley's verse," said a Canadian journal, "is evidence of his mental condition under the influence of

liquor, it would be well if all our magazine versifiers would discover his brand and use the same." The suggestion recalls Lincoln's remark about General Grant, but Riley no more wrote his poems while drinking than did Grant move his army to Richmond in a state of intoxication. In periods of thanksgiving after he had escaped from the clutches of his enemy, Riley wrote exquisite verse. His genius reached the pinnacle of achievement in a two-year total abstinence period.

In certain quarters it was held that there was "too much digging away at the Hoosier Poet's private character"; his poetry belonged to the people; his virtues and vices were his own. Madison Cawein, in afteryears a guest of the poet at his home in Lockerbie Street, held persistently to this opinion. A resident of Louisville, he was familiar with what had happened there. "Riley," he said on one occasion, "you should write your own biography. A man's infirmities are his own affair, and it is his right to deny them publicity."

"He that covereth his sins shall not prosper," returned Riley. "As to a biography, I have neither the time nor the inclination." This led to talk about biography, Cawein holding to the exclusion of such blemishes as the Louisville incident. "Not at all," said Riley. "It was an unpleasant, regrettable thing, I know, but it happened, happened conspicuously. It was another turning point in my history."

Cawein had touched a vital point, and Riley soon became so earnest and interesting that he was permitted to do all the talking. This substantially is what he said: "I read a sketch of an author in a

magazine the other day. 'His character is without blemish from his earliest years,' it said. Why write like that about any man? It is false; the reader knows it is false, and the writer knew it when he wrote it. It is the old New England way of making authors perfect. Nobody believes it. I prefer the biography of Mark Twain. Biography should have shadows in it, like those in the Bible. There is King David, breaker of the eighth and tenth Commandments, wronging himself and others to satisfy his carnal nature. He was a chief among sinners. Do you know, my friend, that you southerners would burn men at the stake for sins David committed? And yet this same King David was a poet, the best one in the Bible.

"When I was a young man," continued Riley, "the old philosopher, Bronson Alcott came to Indiana with his conversations. A crowd of fifty or a hundred men and women collected about him. He sat in a chair and answered questions—had much to say about the dual nature of man. Man had two natures; one he called the Deuce, the other, the Angel. We had here at the time, the chaplain of a little flock somewhere on the edge of town, a 'sanctified' man. How do I know? He *said* he was. I see him now in his come-to-Jesus coat, striding self-righteously along the street. He was as dead to the moral needs of our community as the flag-pole on the *Journal* Works. Well, he was among those present and rose to confuse the philosopher, as he thought.

"'Who is this Deuce you talk so much about?' he asked.

"'You, yourself, sir,' returned Alcott, 'are the an-

swer to your query. You amaze me that you have lived so long with him and have not known him.'

"The Deuce," concluded Riley, "was in King David as he is in Tom, Dick, and Harry and the Hoosier Poet. The Deuce works iniquity. But David had also the Angel in him. That made him a poet. The Angel wrote the Psalms. The Angel made him the man after God's own heart. A biography, to be worth reading, must be an authentic experience, tell of things in the Bible way, tell of the Deuce as well as the Angel, that the one may be hated and avoided, and the other loved and emulated. You shall not say of your subject that his character is without blemish. Mark Twain once told me that he was always haunted by a little bad man, and that sometimes the little devil got the upper hand of good intentions. Twain said that his life was like Australia—picturesque, full of surprises and adventures and incongruities and contradictions and incredibilities. There were the facts, Twain added; they could not be dodged; they all happened."

"Every hour of every day," Riley said once to a reporter, "I stand up in front of myself and say it shall not be this way; and it *is* this way. You might as well try to stop a cyclone, turn an iceberg from its midnight path through the sea."

As in the gloom of the Poe-Poem forgery, so after the painful reports from Louisville many said, "This is the end of the Hoosier Poet's fame." But again such prophecies were false. Within two weeks he declined an offer of two hundred dollars a night. "The poet and I will travel in my private car," said the theatrical manager who made the offer: "I will make him one of the greatest attractions on the road."

The offer was declined. Friends protested strongly against a possible repetition of the lecture disasters. "At heart," wrote Frank G. Carpenter, "Riley is what his poems show him to be—a great big boy with a soul in sympathy with the good, the true and the beautiful. He bestows mercy on the sinful, and has a kindly feeling toward all that is sad and sorrowful in humanity. It goes without saying that such a man should not sell his soul for one-half its profits to an advertising agent."

Never again will I devote my time the year round to the lecture platform—such was the poet's resolution. Many temptations came to break it, but he kept his word. Three men signally strengthened the resolution. "For your art's sake," wrote Meredith Nicholson, "I hope you are out of the platform business for good. You will now do what I have presumed to preach to you for a long time, the making of serious verse."

"Count on me to the death," wrote Hamlin Garland. "I was afraid you were doing too much. You are worn out. Take a good rest and go back to writing. What's the use, if you have money enough to live on? We want Whitcomb Riley's poems. We don't like this knocking about the country wearing himself out. We always talked plainly to each other, did we not? So I say I would rather see you a poor poet in a garret than a lecturer in the hands of a money-grabber. It's an ill wind that drives no soul to port."

Later Rudyard Kipling wrote from Battleboro, Vermont: "It is good to hear about your fleecing the Egyptians, but remember that reading, though it does not feel that way at first by reason of the excitement,

has the knack of breaking a man up into little pieces, and it is possible to buy money too dearly. Therefore, appoint a time and limit, or the dear public out of its very kindness will merely kill you and then wonder why in the world you died. I have seen so many men go that way that I am a bit scared and the more because they tell me your readings are great, which means that you put a lot of yourself into them. You will not find me on the warpath yet awhile. I would go far to listen to you—and some day we will meet."

Ever after, the poet appointed "a time and limit" to lecturing. He and Nye had an agreement with their manager that they were to have one day a week for writing, but the booking had been so close that Sunday was the only open day, which to some minds, accounted for the inferiority of their product, a few boldly affirming that it was inferior because written on Sunday. Painfully conscious of his failure, it was no surprise to his nearest friends, that Riley desired to give both the public and himself a *rest;* "and if mine should be long, deep and profound," he wrote Benjamin Parker, "I could with a quavering sigh of relief, slacken the belt of my shroud and pile down like the print of a small boy in the snow."

Scarcely had he "paused to take breath," as he phrased it, when the demand for his "writings increased to an extent that was astounding and bewilderingly unaccountable." And then the Muse "dropped in" to see him. "Here it had been raining for days and days and likewise some other days and days," he wrote a distant friend; "kind of a serial rain, the author of which seems to be trying to produce some-

thing longer and more tedious than *Middlemarch*. And so last night I began as I thought to succumb to its dread influence, and sat down to write a melancholy poem—with what result? Why bless you, that little poem ('The Little-Red Apple Tree') just laid back and laughed and laughed like somebody was ticklin' its feet! And I was so jollied up by it that I laughed with it, and the pair of us (the poem and I) well-nigh raised the neighbors."

By July (1890) the demand had become so great that he was "driven to the verge of brain-softening by publishers, editors, interviewers, side managers and alluring orders." Innumerable orders, but how was he to fill them? "I would like to write such a poem as you outline," he wrote an editor, "could I see a clear way to its completion. Like engagements—old, old, centuries old—are slowly making me honest enough with latter patrons to tell them frankly that my soundest promises won't hold shucks. I mean well but seem helplessly perverse in the righteous fulfillment of all orders. By this you are most justly to infer that my poetry, however poor, is better than my word. The verse must go therefore as I turn it loose—first come, first served, with great liberal landscapes of allowances."

In such manner Riley turned loose "June at Woodruff," "Bereaved," and "Kissing the Rod," but the poems were not fresh from the mint. The latter was ten years old—so long had it to wait for approval. "'Bereaved'," he wrote Newton Matthews, "will make you weep out loud." In lines to Riley, Matthews celebrated his friend's verse in true, lyric fashion:

"Few singers since the world began,
My comrade, e'er blew such a tone
Of joyance from the Pipes of Pan,
As your warm lips have lately blown;
No grief unknown, no old-world moan,
Finds voice in you; your songs are new
As April lilacs dashed with dew;
Your themes are common, but your thought
Gleams like a frightened firefly caught
In tangles of a trellised vine,
Or like a flashing jewel brought
To light from some deserted mine."

CHAPTER XV

THE POET AT FORTY

A MAN of extreme moods and opinions was the Hoosier Poet, ranging as he wrote from the height of every rapture down to the sobs of every lost delight,—not always, but often enough to be supremely interesting and sometimes distinctly disagreeable—swearing by one thing one week and repudiating it the next:—at the summit of his glee, a delectable creature for whom his friends could find no parallel this side of boyhood; and again, so glum and funereal that a hermit crab would be preferable company.

Life was March weather, blustering and sunny in a day. At times he believed in the tyranny of circumstances, the "iron links of Destiny." Free agency was an empty name. Again, when more heavenly sentiments sparkled in his reflections, he believed in the power of good to resist all malevolent forces—in a word, the poet was his own commander-in-chief.

His friend William Dean Howells once intimated that a *young* man is a dancing balloon, a bundle of experiments and irregularities; in short, he is a fool till he is forty. "A fool *after* forty," was Riley's quick response. "Did you ever know a wise man who was not a fool?" The barrier between wisdom and folly is about as thin as that between civilization and barbarism.

Riley was of Montaigne's opinion, that there is no man who has not deserved hanging five or six times.

When Riley was thirty-three, John Hay told him that man reaches his zenith at forty. At the same time Hay admonished the poet, if he had any great undertaking ahead, to begin it before passing that milestone. Things begun after forty were less likely to be achieved.

In verse production Riley was passing his zenith at the moment Hay was talking with him, although both were oblivious of the fact. When *Afterwhiles* appeared, critics, who knew nothing of Riley's "Prolific Decade," said: "He is just in his prime and more and better work may be expected from him." In fact he was nearing the end of his prime.

At forty he had done his greatest work. Nor is this to his discredit as some older poets have thought. Youth was the mainspring of all his poetic production. "Youth makes history," he heard George William Curtis once remark. "Wherever there is genuine, victorious work in the poetic line to be done, Destiny sends young poets with faith in their hearts and fire in their veins to do it—not old ones with feathers in their hats."

After his fortieth year, reluctant as friends were to admit it, the moments were rare when Riley rose to the top of his power. The flow of youth in him was diminished. There were no "great paroxysms of inspiration" as there had been, and friends remarked as they did of Wordsworth that he wrote beyond his days of inspiration. A few years later critics grew more severe and attributed the lack of tuneful measures to an overproduction of obituary verse. "Not in

necrology," Myron Reed wrote the poet, "not there, not there, my child. Your harp is tuned to 'When The Hearse Comes Back.'"

Late in the 'nineties Bliss Carman remarked that "Riley is about the only man in America who is writing any poetry." Carman did not know—and his not knowing did not in the least lessen the value of his opinion—he did not know that the poetry he praised had been written in the 'eighties, back in the high tide of Riley's genius. When Riley was forty he was advised to make a bonfire of accumulated manuscripts, letters and papers. "The smoke from it," said a friend, "would fill the air with genii and overcast the face of the heavens." Had Riley acted on the advice, valuable poems would have been lost to posterity—hundreds of fragments, which grew into poems in the 'nineties, would have been destroyed. He preferred to save everything and let Time be the destroyer.

His fortieth year marked distinctly another turning-point in Riley's life. For then in response to the successful activities of his publishers he began to take a lively interest in his books. A year or so before, he had been skeptical about any substantial financial reward from book publication. "There seems to be so much of the lottery principle in it," he wrote a young poet. "What I confidently think will take well with the public does not take, and what I fear will not go, goes. And so it is, as I learn from all available experiences of literary friends. At best the monetary success is unworthy recompense for all the trials and anxieties one must endure. For fifteen years I have been striving to attain an audience for my verse, and long ago would have given up in sheer despair but

that I had a more practical calling [income from the *Journal* and the platform] by which I could put bread in my mouth, and also pie. The majority of mankind is more in sympathy with dimes than rhymes. A poet must, therefore, equip himself, someway, with *means*, that's all! Longfellow did it by teaching; Bryant by newspaper work; Stoddard, the same; and so on with the whole-kit-and-bilin' of the twittering brotherhood that 'get there' as well as versify. Singing *alone* will not pay except in the rarest instances."

The dissolution of the partnership with Nye marked the end of confusion in business affairs, due to the prudent direction of his brother-in-law, Henry Eitel, who henceforth had control of the poet's financial investments. "Had my brother-in-law been present five years before," said Riley in 1890, "I would not have signed my death-warrant. There was no business infirmity, no two-penny nonsense after he took charge. A poet in business transactions is as defenseless as a duckling. I knew a poet who once made sixty dollars and then (being naturally and wholly impractical) dropped every nickel of it in Wall Street. My broth-in-law discouraged such ventures."

The year 1890 marked the beginning of financial prosperity for the poet, and in the minds of some, the end of genius. Thomas Bailey Aldrich contended that to the Goddess, poverty is the most alluring condition; that she delights in the wretchedness of mean attics; that when prosperity comes she bids the bard farewell:

"Of old when I walked on a rugged way,
And gave much work for but little bread,
The Goddess dwelt with me night and day,
Sat at my table, haunted my bed.

"Wretched enough was I sometimes,
Pinched and harassed with vain desires;
But thicker than clover sprung the rhymes
As I dwelt like a sparrow among the spires.

"For a man should live in a garret aloof,
And have few friends, and go poorly clad,
With an old hat stopping the chink in the roof,
To keep the Goddess constant and glad."

Deny John Howard Payne pleasures and palaces, and lodge him in a debtor's prison, and he writes "Home, Sweet Home," possibly the best loved song in the English language.

The Goddess *did* sit with Riley at his table and haunt his bed in his days of deprivation, when he wrote in "The Dead Rose," "The Crow's Nest" and "The Morgue." In his own words, he was almost afraid to move out of his tracks sometimes for fear of stepping on another poem. "If I am idle a day," he wrote a friend, "unfinished poems sob over my neglect. They scamper like noisy children about my empty brain. I hear one calling now. It will be absolutely jealous I believe should I not succeed in materializing its perturbed spirit by two o'clock to-night. At this high pressure I may have to rise and explain things as once did—

"A shrewd non-explosive-oil man
While testing for friends of his clan,
Who explained from aloof
Through a hole in the roof,
That he'd stuck the match in the wrong can."

In the 'nineties Riley wrote perhaps a score of popular poems, such as "The Enduring," "The Sermon of

the Rose," and "The Name of Old Glory," but in none of them did his poetic genius reach the heights of earlier days.

He was not inclined to talk about the waning of his powers, and when he did, it was to joke. "Back there," he would say, recalling his prime, "I heard voices. Bless you, man! I have seen times when stark and immovable I could block traffic in Washington Street,—dazed to the core over a whippoorwill calling across the darkness and the dew, or something. I never understood it, don't suppose I ever will. A kind of catch-your-breath feeling, you know,

"Kind o' like that sweet-sick feelin', in the long sweep
of a swing,
The first you ever swung in, with yer sweetheart, i
jing!—
Yer first picnic—yer first ice-cream—yer first o'
ever'thing
'At happened 'fore yer dancin-days wuz over!"

There was some measure of truth, too, in the statement made at this time that Riley was yielding to the more conservative, dignified forms of verse construction. In his latter days he did fail to maintain "the independence of imagination." "James Whitcomb Riley is a genuine genius," wrote Maurice Thompson; "he sings in his own way his own tender, amusing, pathetic songs outright from the fountains of nature. The moment that he shall feel the extrinsic pressure of an artificial atmosphere and turn to books and rules for models and guidance, the particular, definitive quality, which sets him apart from the choir of smooth and pretty singers by note, will depart from his verse forever."

It was the artificial atmosphere of his prosperous days that drew from old-time friends the protestation that "the modern Riley is a myth." They thought his love of children a fiction. According to them the child the poet loved was a memory, the child of the Long Ago, the child in the abstract. The poet's love of Nature was explained in the same way. He did not stand entranced knee-deep in clover fields as he was supposed to do. That too was a memory of his youth, a retrospect.

Whether the modern Riley was a myth does not particularly concern these pages. That he wrote inspiringly of childhood and nature, no sympathetic reader of his poems will deny. His books are on the shelves —they speak for him. Somewhere in his career he did passionately love Nature and children. Sweet waters do not flow from a bitter fountain.

As to the Riley quality in his latter-day productions, friends marked its absence in such occasional poems as the "Ode to Thomas A. Hendricks," written "to order" the summer of 1890, for the unveiling of the vice-president's statue in Indianapolis. According to the Atlanta *Constitution* it was "merely sound and fury signifying nothing." Riley's own criticism of it was not so harsh, but late in life he admitted its failure as he did of other poems in its class. "The trouble with poems for occasions," he once observed, "is their lack of heart and human nature. There is not sufficient inspiration in the desire of a memorial committee. When I write a poem of that kind I become a piece of intellectual machinery—a grinder at the mill; my heart is not in my work."

Myron Reed always insisted that the great years in

Riley's development belonged to the 'seventies and the 'eighties. "The poet was true to his polarity. His magnetic needle pointed in one direction. He did not always do his best, but he did things that were excellent and commanding, and they were so because he wrote his poems in *his* way, the new way."

While we may deplore the absence of the Riley quality in verse he wrote in the 'nineties, we can not but be grateful for his devotion to the task of bookmaking, his editing—revamping he called it—poems to that end, although his revision did sometimes damage the original freshness and beauty. "I am going to print books steadily till dissolution sets in on Yours till Then," he wrote a friend after publishing *Afterwhiles*. During the summer of 1890 he prepared the manuscript for *Rhymes of Childhood*. "Getting it together," he remarked, "has been great fun, and I am one of the happiest boys in it." The book marked an epoch in juvenile literature. For a long while its author had

"Held that the true age of wisdom is when
We are boys and girls, and not women and men;
When as credulous children we know things because
We believe them—however averse to the laws."

In prose the child—the boy in particular—had been emancipated from the sugary atmosphere of the front parlor in such books as Warner's *Being a Boy*, Aldrich's *Story of a Bad Boy*, and Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Those books had done signal service to the race in choking off the consumptive child-saints modeled after the so-called heroes in the old English Sunday-school books. What Twain,

Aldrich and Warner had done in prose, the *Rhymes of Childhood* did in verse.

The book's claim to fame lay in the absence of literary affectation. Children were presented without gloss or distortion. "They were real Simon-pure children," said Riley, "who would make real men and women." Their actions were perfectly natural and hence, as Reynolds the painter had said, were graceful.

It is not Riley's province, he said in his Prefatory note to the volume, to offer any excuse for deportment of children. Their very defects of speech and gesture were at times engaging. No need to "worry for their futures, since the All-Kind Mother has them in her keep."

In his paper, "Dialect in Literature," read before the Indianapolis Literary Club, October, 1890, Riley defended the child at greater length. "Since for ages," he said, "this question seems to have been left unasked, it may be timely now to propound it—Why not the real child in Literature? The real child is good enough (we all know he is bad enough) to command our admiring attention and most lively interest in real life, and just as we find him 'in the raw.' Then why do we deny him any righteous place of recognition in our Literature? From the immemorial advent of our dear old Mother Goose, Literature has been especially catering to the juvenile needs and desires, and yet steadfastly overlooking, all the time, the very principles upon which Nature herself founds and presents this lawless little brood of hers—the children. It is not the children who are out of order; it is Literature.

"The elegantly minded purveyors of Child Literature can not possibly tolerate the presence of any but the

refined children—the very proper children—the studiously thoughtful, poetic children;—and these must be kept safe from the contaminating touch of our rough-and-tumble little fellows in 'hodden gray,' with frowzy heads, begrimed but laughing faces, and such awful awful vulgarities of naturalness, and crimes of simplicity, and brazen faith and trust, and love of life and everybody in it. All other real people are getting into Literature, why not have real children in it?"

Reaffirming his views he wrote the editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal:*

The *Indianapolis Journal,* October 23, 1890.
Edward Bok, Esq.
Dear Mr. Bok:

Answering your kindly inquiry: Am just now going to press with a Holiday book, entitled *Rhymes of Childhood*—nearly a hundred poems, dialect and serious equally. In it the enthusiastic writer goes scampering barefoot from page to page, with no more sense of dignity than socks, and the like wholesome rapture in heels and heart. I think of what a child Lincoln must have been, and the same child-heart at home within his breast when death came by. It is all in the line of *Fact*—that's the stuff that makes good fiction, romance, and poetry. I digress to say this, but I glory in the crime. Thanking you with all heartiness I remain as ever,

Very truly yours,
J. W. Riley.

From the first the book won high favor with the children, but it was an enigma to parents. How a bachelor could so touch the heart of children was a mystery. "I have two 'riders on the knee,' " a mother

wrote him. "I am sorry you had to borrow a little nephew for the frontispiece." The poet told her that *his* children lived in the Paradise of Memory. He talked rapturously of the gift of Eternal Childhood. "When I get that gift," he said, "I will thrill you with swarms of hitherto untwittered poems." Looking backward (which was his heavenly way of looking forward)

> "He heard the voice of summer streams,
> And, following, he found the brink
> Of cooling springs with childish dreams
> Returning as he kneeled to drink."

The only excuse for a new poet would seem to be that he utter a new word, voice a new phase of emotion, and this Riley did in his *Rhymes of Childhood.* Its reception was unparalleled in American poetry. "You should see all the lovely letters from the literary gods," wrote Riley to a friend. "They say things that make me pinch myself to see if I am dreaming. I have not a dissenting nor timid comment as to the *audacity* of part of the book. First and most exacting of the literary high-lights are daily thumping my shoulders through the mail. Simply all is well, and very well—can not begin to supply the demand."

"The book," wrote William Dean Howells in *Harper's Magazine,* "takes itself quite out of the category of ordinary verse, and refuses to be judged by the usual criterions. The fact is, our Hoosier Poet has found lodgment in the people's love, which is a much safer place for any poet than their admiration. What he has said of very common aspects of life has en-

deared him to the public. You feel, in reading his verse, that here is one of the honestest souls that ever uttered itself in that way."

"Thanks a thousand, thousand times," wrote Mark Twain, "for the charming book which laments my own lost youth for me as no words of mine could do."

There came also the usual fine word from

Washington, D. C., December, 1890.

Dear Mr. Riley:

Your *Rhymes of Childhood* makes a delightful volume. They come home especially to the hearts of those who grew up as you and I did in small western towns. I hardly know which class of poems I like best, those in which the children do the talking, or those in which you speak in your own proper person. They are equally good, natural and genuine. I thank you very much for remembering me and remain,

Yours faithfully,

JOHN HAY.

The summit of praise, in Riley's opinion, was reached in Kipling's lines. A copy of the *Rhymes* had been presented to the British author by George Hitt, who was then residing in London. "To J. W. R." Kipling entitled them:

"Your trail runs to the westward,
And mine to my own place;
There is water between our lodges,
And I have not seen your face;

"But since I have read your verses
It is easy to guess the rest,
Because in the hearts of the children
There is neither East nor West.

"Born to a thousand fortunes
Of good or evil hap,
Once they were kings together,
Throned in a mother's lap.

"Surely they know that secret—
Yellow and black and white,
When they meet as kings together
In innocent dreams at night,

"With a moon they all can play with—
Grubby and grimed and unshod:
Very happy together,
And very near to God.

"Your trail runs to the westward,
And mine to my own place;
There is water between our lodges,
And you can not see my face.

"And that is well—for crying
Should neither be written nor seen,
But if I call you Smoke-in-the-Eyes,
I know you will know what I mean."

CHAPTER XVI

ANCHORAGE IN LOCKERBIE STREET

HOW old are you? "On the sunny side of forty," Riley would answer, leaving the Paul Pry to infer which side. The poet was on the "west" side of that meridian before he reached his settled place of abode—

> "Gracious anchorage, at last,
> From the billows of the vast
> Tide of life that comes and goes,
> Whence and where nobody knows."

He had been a Bohemian. "Bear in mind," he would write his friends, "the contingencies of my Nomadic existence—I myself not knowing certainly what will turn up next, or when, or how. I have tacks in my course, and reefs in my sails—my eye on changing winds. About all I know is the *direction* I am trying to go."

Immediately preceding his residence in Lockerbie Street Riley had a room at the Denison House. He took his meals wherever he might be when hungry,—his old-time practice of living at restaurants, pampering his erratic appetite and entertaining original views on diet as he had done when first employed on the Indianapolis *Journal*. "Bread," said one of his associates, "he considered an invention of the devil, and

would have none of it, crackers being a substitute. While business men had lunch the poet had his breakfast. He was long on oyster stews, and cheese and mince pies." Among a hundred other eccentricities was his taste in tablewear. Having lived in restaurants all his life he was not used to thin china, would have only heavy wear such as was safe in the hands of clumsy waiters. His main meal was six o'clock dinner, with coffee and crackers at midnight. "Let us be cheerily contented," he wrote a friend in 1890. "Right here I am going out with a prowling, midnight pie-eating pal, who paces at my door and will not rest until I join him in our customary, unholy feast, which we always relish the more for being assured that we positively should not eat such things at such hours."

Living on the wing, Riley termed it, now in a hotel, now with his brother-in-law, now with his physician, and next "off somewhere lecturing." "Think of it," said he, "I never owned a desk in my life and don't know what it is to own a library. Where do I write? Everywhere—sometimes on the kitchen table in my sister's house, then in the parlor and again on the printer's case—just where the fancy seizes me. Queer how and where authors write. Andrew Lang wrote best in a rose garden—Tolstoi sat on a bed and put his inkstand on a pillow—Dumas used an ebony desk —the lid to Mary Anderson's table was mother-of-pearl. None of your luxuries for the little bench-leg poet. Give him a bleak room, the more uncomfortable the better."

He had been like his friend Charles Warren Stoddard, disposed to "streak off to odd parts of the world with little choice as to where," the difference being

that his friend went to the Navigator Islands or some other oceanic spot, while Riley sallied

> "Out to Greenfield where the Muse
> Dips her sandal in the dews
> Sacredly as night and dawn."

"For years," the poet wrote in "The Boy from Zeeny," "I have been a wanderer from the dear old town of my nativity, but through all my wanderings a gracious fate has always kept me somewhere in its pleasant neighborhood, and in consequence I often pay brief visits to the scenes of my long-vanished boyhood."

A day came when Stoddard turned his face toward Indiana. "Come, by all means!" Riley wrote him in January, 1891. "Only, give us fair warning and we'll arrange the best possible for your entertainment, and our mutual strife in allaying your restlessness. In that particular I may prove a not all unworthy rival —for already for years I have worn the haircloth off the most uncomfortable surroundings every day. Any commodious accessory at any time obtruding, I find another hotel; simply I will not be put upon by conveniences. Every valuable letter, book, picture, keepsake, manuscript I ever had in the world I've got safely locked up in some other trunk—some place else. But it's *safe*—Omygodyes! That's *one* thing I like about me,—I'm so *careful*, and always so well situated to jump and skite for a train and ride off a-skallyhootin' with my bow legs gracefully unfurled from the rear platform of the last car!—Which reminds me—I'm just now rehearsing for some big fat lecture dates which I'm loathfully about to tackle—within ten days.

But I'm not going to be pressed or crowded, chased and run like a scared dog ever again on earth! and I can make more money this way, too, I find, and maintain a far higher *tone,* don't you know. So from this on, mind you, when Little Tommy Tucker sings for his supper, it means also a supper for his every friend, as well—and it means a supper, moreover, at Delmonico's! Ho, ho! ho! says L. T. Tucker!"

"Sometimes I jot down a little eighty-cent thought," —so Riley once remarked to Bill Nye. "I put it away carefully somewhere and afterwards, unable to find it, it is lost. I have never owned a dictionary or a library, because I have been flitting about from room to room and can not keep anything."

"Our Hoosier Poet was in an Indian Summer of gladness," said Nye, "when he found the 'eighty-cent thought,' and the birds and the angels loved to associate with him. His soul was all aglow with sunshine, but when, after hunting for it two days and the gloom of the third night settled down upon him, he could not find it, his soul was aglow with a red reflection from the great coke works where the worm dieth not and the fire department is an ignominious failure."

The poet's anchorage in Lockerbie Street dates from the summer of 1893. "I am getting tired of this way of living," he remarked to friends down-town one evening—"clean, dead tired, and fagged out and sick of the whole Bohemian business." Later, another evening, he was the guest of Major Charles L. Holstein at the latter's residence. Many years the men had been fast friends. The Major's family, including his wife and her father and mother, had been especially fond of Riley's society, and in the years gone by the

poet had accepted many invitations to dinner. On this particular evening, as he was leaving, Riley said to the Major, "I am never coming back again except on one condition." Rather startled, the Major asked the condition. "That I come as a boarder," returned Riley. The condition was readily and gladly accepted and ever afterward the poet lived at 528 Lockerbie Street—Lockerbie Land, he called the broad, old-fashioned brick house with its air of quiet refinement and solid comfort—never possessing the property in his own name, yet having the joys and privileges of home, receiving visitors and friends and delegations of admirers in his old bachelor days with the same freedom that Irving received them at Sunnyside.

A quiet little street of two irregular squares—ran a description of it when the poet first saw it, right in the heart of the town with vine-wreathed homes and flower gardens above the sidewalks in the shade of maples and sycamores—a gracious retreat for "a poet who had no home, no children and no flowers." Riley wrote in his poem, "Lockerbie Street"—

"There is such a relief, from the clangor and din
Of the heart of the town, to go loitering in
Through the dim, narrow walks, with the sheltering shade
Of the trees waving over the long promenade,
And littering lightly the ways of our feet
With the gold of the sunshine of Lockerbie Street."

The birth of the poem—thirteen years before Riley came to live in the shady retreat—affords another instance of his capricious way of investing an incident with mystery, his way of eluding facts, which was often

The Poet, His Nephew, Edmund Eitel, and Hamlin Garfield, at the Greenfield Homestead—1894

HOME IN LOCKEBBIE STREET, 1880, THE YEAR THE POET WROTE "LOCKERBIE STREET"

provoking to a sedate reporter in search of them. Diligently the poet sought to minimize the importance of his own performance. In a postscript to Ella Wheeler, (July, 1880), he artfully referred to the incident which prompted the poem. "Had a glance or two from a mysterious young lady who whizzes about town with a vixenish mare and a clay-colored gig. And I tracked her at last to her hidden fastness, and tomorrow I publish this adroit indication of the fact—hoping her cunning eyes will fall upon it." (Here followed copy of the poem complete.) At another time Riley said: "Chance first led me into Lockerbie Street. Chance has brought me many gifts. Chance has signally contributed to my salvation." While out driving with a friend he came one afternoon to the corner of Lockerbie and East Streets. The shady thoroughfare seemed to invite him. At the same moment the mysterious young lady whizzed past in the clay-colored gig. The poet observed that she alighted in front of the old-fashioned brick house. This incident was all the foundation there was for the fanciful postscript to Miss Wheeler. "I caught the trick phrase while out driving," said Riley, "and it began at once to warble in my heart. A day or so after I revisited the street. Walking back to the office, I repeated the phrase with every footstep—Lockerbie Street—Lockerbie Street—Lockerbie Street. The words clung to me like tickseed to a tiger. That night I wrote the poem and next day copied it from memory, on a tall table in the office and sent it to the editor in answer to call for 'copy,' never dreaming of its subsequent success." The poem appeared in the Indianapolis *Journal* the following morning. On reaching the office that day

the poet found his desk covered with flowers, the gift of residents in Lockerbie Street, who had read the poem at their breakfast tables.

A half-century before Riley wrote the poem, one George Lockerbie, a Scotchman, had cleared a little farm at the edge of the forest and when the baby street was born it was christened after the farmer. Riley had not coined the name as some, even his near friend Burdette, had thought. "The poem," said Burdette, "had the natural, child-dancing step of heart poems, and the name fitted in so well with the rhythm that I thought it was merely one of Fancy's songs, with an airy habitation and a dream name. Because in those days Jamesie did not live in Lockerbie Street, and never expected to pitch his tent on the pleasant city lane, which did not belong in town at all, but which loitered too long at the edge of the meadow, and was overtaken and hemmed in by the growing city, always hungry for the pastures and the fringing woods that lie without the walls."

Lockerbie Street was a paradise to Burdette and he was always grateful for the loyal hearts in it—and that was what Riley desired it to be, a Little Arcadia, so quiet and shady that the sun could not destroy the freshness of the night.

In the years after his "anchorage" he had two literary dens, such as they were, one his quiet room in Lockerbie Street, the other the "Chimney Corner" with his publishers at their old location on Washington Street. Day after day he vibrated between the two, and when strangers became too numerous and too insistent at the latter, he sought the refuge of the former, where at times he was all but inaccessible.

Frank G. Carpenter found him "harder to get at than the President of the United States." Robert Burns Wilson suspected him of hiding away from the critics. Riley being one of the most potent literary forces then at work in America, it was to be expected that his books would be "slashingly criticized." "They are jumping on you," wrote Wilson. "Well, let them jump. They can not hurt you," the inference being that Riley was secure in the hearts of the people—and in Lockerbie Street.

Even his lovable, long-suffering friend, Bliss Carman, could not detach him from his quiet retreat. "I have been perfecting a long cherished plan," wrote Carman one May day, "a plot it is to capture you for a week this summer in the mountains. I feel that if I can only get a rope around you and get you there you won't regret it. The place is the Catskills. Very quiet and secluded. Nothing to do but to walk over the hills by forest trails or sit on the porch and listen to the birds. Just trees and hills and air and view everywhere. You helped me over many an hour in the past and I feel I have more need to see you since good old Richard Hovey went away—detained by some great enterprise, I guess."

There was silence in the little room and in the Chimney Corner. In June Carman wrote again: "Didst never receive a letter from me written from Washington in May? Or art thou only a delinquent correspondent? Anyhow take a pen and sit down quickly and write me for I have need of you in my business. So God love you and remove from you the sin of procrastination." Still Riley sinned against his brother in that regard. The call of the Catskills and

Carman was very great, but not sufficient to lure him from Lockerbie Street.

When he was lured from home by "fat lecture dates," there was a tug at his heart-strings that Riley had not felt since his youthful days in the old Greenfield homestead. The Holstein family circle, hidden away from the "horrific noise of the railroad," was remembered daily. Mrs. Holstein was the "Saint Lockerbie" of the circle, and Riley often so addressed her. The Major also had his by-names, while the family as a whole was "The Lockerbies." The poet amused the Lockerbies with many quaint signatures: "Little Oak-Man," the "Wandering Jew," "LeRoy Kingen," "Jimpsy," and "James Whipcord Riley." Numerous letters passed to and fro, and often the Little Oak-Man sent home a "wail of woe," when "rain was in possession of the universe," or he had to ride "thirty miles in a freight caboose"—or some other sorry something made him doubly homesick. A few excerpts show the tenor of the letters.

Green Fields and Running Brooks, Indiana,
August 2, 1893.

Dear Lockerbies:

As friends of his in his more prosperous days, you may be interested to know that old Jim Riley has drifted back here and obtained employment at his old trade. He is now painting and varnishing at my residence, and I can say in his behalf—should you have any plain work of the kind this fall—Jim's the feller for you to git. He does good work and don't ask no fancy prices. Give him a call. Also cistern-walling, shingling, and Conveyancing.

Yours truly,
LeRoy Kingen.

The simplicity and the modesty of Lockerbie Street were in sharp contrast to the display and the show he found at points along the way when traveling. Offensive egotism in one section drew from him a characteristic protest. "Every one," he wrote home, "says *my* house, or *my* store, or *my* hotel, or *my* bank, or *my* mining interests, or *my* horses, or *my* crop, or *my* outlook:—*My* God! how they do wear out a stranger! Thank heaven I am turning towards *my* home again. 'Twill not be long—tell every lovely friend back there in Indiany. Tell the city authorities to load up their fire department hose with my never-failing love and esteem, and splash it all over the blessed municipality. When I die, I expect to wake right up again in Indianapolis, and though I have heard Heaven very highly spoken of, I will more than likely remark: 'Well, boys, you hain't overdrawed the pictur' ary particle.'"

The poet seldom quoted the Bible, but when he did it was most effective. Once, after returning from a great city, which, as he thought, was running to waste and wickedness in the pursuit of pleasures and riches, he read from the Bible, drawling out the words so impressively and emphatically, that his listener had a sense of shame for his country:

I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit. I bought men-servants and maid-servants, and had servants born in my house; I had great possessions of herds and flocks, above all that were before me in Jerusalem; I gathered me also silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I gat me men-

singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem.

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity, and a striving after wind.

He once remarked that all this noise we call commercial prosperity is just an endless, ingenious strife to separate a man from his money. "What does it all mean?" he queried sorrowfully—"this rumbling of trucks and milk wagons over cobblestones—this jingling and jangling of telephones—this moan of trolleys and subways—this pushing and shoving of crowds, as if the whole human family had to be jammed through the gangway in an hour. Is it any wonder that the madness leads to the sanitarium and the grave?"

Thus was he usually miserable in a great metropolis. In a state of confusion he once wrote from New York City:

Westminster Hotel, February, 1894.

Dear Saint and Charles Lockerbie:

Will you share this hasty letter? How I am panted out with travel and starvation, and here of course the panic is in full possession of me. Everybody wants me to go everywhere and I don't know where to turn or what to try to do—for I know it won't work—not for me. In consequence people are getting mad at me in regiments. I try to stay in and, thank God, mainly succeed. Reached here about twelve last night, and was kept up till three with accumulated worries and messages. After breakfast went to the

Century—did not a thing but stand on one foot, and then on its poor contemporary, which wanted its new shoe off and frozen toes tucked up in its blissful bedgown. Again faced the razor-bladed weather back around Union Square where Conkling lost his life—and again attained my room. But not to sleep—ohh, nohhh! Table piled full of mail that simply *snows* here from all sorts of charity endeavors, and people who want to keep the wolf from their particular doors with frank ingenuous contributions from millionaire poets like myself, of whose verses they are so *passionately* fond. And books, books, my own books,—table wobblin' with 'em—waitin' for my very latest, freshest autographs. With all this I pleasantly beguile me leisure hours.

"God bless you," he wrote from Syracuse, "count all the good things you have, and see how very small indeed is the ratio of the bad. I am trying to write here cheerily in a room as cold as charity, and on the bottom of the reversed drawer of the dresser, and with a little cambric pen about the size of a Brownie's nutpick. The Fates are after me again in this wintry climate. Since yesterday morning, as God hears me, I have not been warm. And yet I have been a favored guest in the home of wealth—have waded through piles of Persian rugs and carpets of fabulous Oriental looms; and at groaning mahogany boards have been proffered *wines of every clime*—but no coffee, hot and steaming, the *only* thing I can drink. Why should I suffer myself to be wrenched away from my hotel and made a favored guest? Echo answers Why."

Traveling between lecture points he wrote the following (after Longfellow's translation of "La Chaudeau"):

"At La Ker-bie, nor mirth nor wit
Ever grows old, (surmising it),—
The youth of a story is never gone,
And a joke lasts on and on and on—
Till Matthew Arnold would thrill with glee,
At La Ker-bie!

"At La Ker-bie, O friends of mine,
Live, laugh, revel and read and dine;
And sometimes, by the evening grate,
Think of the Little Man out so late
With no home-path, nor no night-key,
For La Ker-bie!

"Yet, La Ker-bie—ah, La Ker-bie!—
As I for you, so yearn for me:
Look, through smiles, for the by-and-by—
Christmas is coming, and so am I!
Yours forever, and utterly,
At La Ker-bie! JAMESIE."

Near the sundown of the poet's afternoon there came days when all roads led to Lockerbie Street. His habit at heart of looking on the best side of things, however outwardly he might complain, had indeed (in Sam Johnson phrase) been worth more than a thousand pounds a year. There were infinite values in Lockerbie Street, which gold could not measure—heartfelt felicitations; midnight serenades at his study window; days when his native Indiana paid tribute to his art; legions of school children smiling and singing through the street; voluminous quantities of mail; greetings from far and wide flowing in upon him; letters, telegrams and cable messages—and last but not least the voice of the loyal Bliss Carman with a love tribute in song—

"Lockerbie Street is a little street,
Just one block long;
But the days go there with a magical air,
The whole year long.
The sun in his journey across the sky
Slows his car as he passes by;
The sighing wind and the grieving rain
Change their tune and cease to complain;
And the birds have a wonderful call that seems,
Like a street-cry out of the land of dreams;
For there the real and the make-believe meet.
Time does not hurry in Lockerbie Street.

"Lockerbie Street is a little street,
Only one block long;
A little apart, yet near the heart,
Of the city's throng.
If you are a stranger, looking to find
Respite and cheer for soul and mind,
And have lost your way, and would inquire
For a street that will lead you to Heart's Desire,—
To a place where the spirit is never old,
And gladness and love are worth more than gold,—
Ask the first boy or girl that you meet!
Every one knows where is Lockerbie Street."

CHAPTER XVII

POEMS HERE AT HOME

A YOUNG man with a poetic ambition once came to Riley for literary advice. There was a dearth of poetic material in the young man's environment—"nothing but inertia and stagnation." He longed to go to Princeton or Harvard that he might have the impulse of great libraries and the atmosphere of culture. "My dear young fellow," replied Riley, "God should send you a vision. Lift up your eyes and look on the fields white already to harvest. Excellence is right here at home where we are falling over it and barking our shins against it every day. Shape from that thy work of art."

Riley went on to say that the child of genius was often born under a roof of straw—*born where God intends*—and that he is just as likely to find the material for his art in that vicinity as in the neighborhood of the college. He deplored a man's disloyalty to the region of his nativity. If a man was born and reared on the banks of Deer Creek, there was a reason for it—a heavenly reason; he had the same right to be there that Mount Washington has to be in New England. "Drop a seal in the sea somewhere about the Tropic of Cancer," said Riley, "and the homing faculty will lead it back to its breeding rock on the Arctic Circle. By instinct it knows its native island, and that it belongs there."

Loyalty to one's home region was forcibly impressed upon the poet on the occasion of his only visit to England in the summer of 1891. "My first trip abroad," said he, "taught me that the United States is a fine country in which to live. I saw a great many Americans in London, who, ashamed of their country, mingled with the British and attempted to disguise their nationality. Many of them succeeded, much to the gratification of all true Americans. I was told on my return that I had criticized my native land. I had not. If all Americans liked me half as well as I like them I would be indeed a proud and grateful man."

"You have observed," he remarked on another occasion, "that man uniformly sighs for the land of his birth. That is a hint from his Creator that he should not disown his native heath. A man reared in a prairie country may go to live in a hilly section, but there comes a day, if his heart expands as it should, when he longs to see the prairies again. He saw no poetry in them when he lived there, but he finds it on his return. The scales have fallen from his eyes. Myron Reed heard a shipload singing in the rain on the upper deck at two o'clock in the morning, as they approached the Clyde. And what were they singing? *Ye Banks and Braes of Bonnie Doon.*"

Poets, Riley was told, are birds of passage, who range abroad for material, who bring home from other climes the seeds that germinate in song; "but they seldom find nutritious food in foreign lands," he replied. "None of them ever brings home flowers half so sweet as those they find in their own neighborhood." In this connection he had ever at hand a

favorite Longfellow sentiment. "All praise," he would repeat, changing the tense of the lines,

> "Be to the bards of simple ways,
> Who walk with Nature hand in hand,
> Whose country is their Holy Land,
> Whose singing robes are homespun brown
> From looms of their native town—
> *Which they are not ashamed to wear.*"

His favorite British painters, Riley observed at another time, had not imitated the old masters. They had sought the materials for their pictures in the living world around them. They had gathered in the fruit, pressed the grapes, and poured out the wine for themselves. They had painted life as they saw it in the heart of England, not in Herculaneum or some other sepulcher. "The same power that made Vesuvius," said Riley, "made the brook in which you splashed when you came from school, and the brook holds a story as sweet and full of interest as the tale of the volcano."

What made Riley's advice to young poets so seasonable was the fact that he himself had not been disobedient to his own teaching. The world had been to him a whispering gallery. He had nourished his heart by imbibing from the great fountain of information around him. Daily he had seen the miracle of trees and flowers from his own doorway. "Town and country," said he, "seemed a great Wonder Book whose leaves had never been turned." Nature beckoned him to her companionship:

"Come, wander with me," she said,
"Into regions yet untrod;
And read what is still unread
In the manuscripts of God."

At the beginning of his literary career Riley had wholesome encouragement on this line from Myron Reed. "My advice to a young poet," said Reed, "is to remain in America, the most poetic country on the globe. Here we have youth; here the lilacs bloom and the plovers fly as they do in Europe. This is a new world given to us for new things. There is something wrong when the American poet, for lack of material, goes back and makes another translation of Virgil."

Reed had been encouraging, but there had been days when the mere mention of the poet's homely material provoked ridicule. Riley sometimes grew eloquent about the poetry of the Wabash country, meaning thereby his own Indiana. "What Riley needs," said a distinguished jurist, "is a physician to pass on his intelligence." It was absurd to think of finding poetry in backyards and backwoods.

"What is that sound I hear," Riley asked a group of Harvard students one snowy day in Boston. "Men shoveling snow from the sidewalk," was the answer. "So it is," Riley assented; "and do you know there is melody in it—poetry in that sound? There are subjects for poems all about us. If you look you can see them in the fields as you ride along the road; meet them on the train—types, traits, customs, scenery. What the poet needs is discernment." The students listened with misgivings. They had thought of poetry as something that graced only the high places.

"Your own Emerson," Riley went on to say to the Harvard boys, "enchants us by idealizing our common lives and fortunes. When he passes, the drowsy world is turned to flame. He tells of riding in a Concord coach through the North End of Boston. There, he observed, the men and women of the humbler classes were unrestrained in their manners and their attitudes. They were much more interesting than the clean-shaven, silk-robed procession in Tremont Street."

"Forget not the simple things," Joel Chandler Harris once admonished Riley; "the rotation of the earth that takes the mountain into the sunshine carries the molehill along with it." To each man it was clear that nothing is high because it is in a high place, nothing low because it is in a low place. Alike, the two friends read the lesson in the bright track of the stars and in the dusty course of the poorest thing that drags its length upon the ground. As Riley saw it there was nothing trivial in God's sight. In the chain of man's existence who knows which links are large and which are small, which important and which trifling? Great men, Reed often reminded him, do not despise anything. It was all a delusion that big things were divorced from little things. Newton buckled his shoe with the same wit with which he weighed the moon. "*We* condemn our fellow citizens, *we* cast common lives and common things as rubbish to the void," said Riley. "The Creator is more merciful. As the poet sang it, nothing walks with aimless feet,

> 'Not a worm is cloven in vain,
> Not a moth with vain desire
> Is shrivelled in a fruitless fire.'

It is our littleness that makes the lives of others trivial and their actions cheap. God is in His holy mountain. He will save that which is lame and gather that which was driven away."

For similar reasons Riley held that there is nothing trivial in biography, "unless it is the life of some character too pure and luminous to cast a shadow," he said, "one of those idols biographers sometimes hide in clouds of incense. Could a man write down in a simple style what really happens to him in this life, he would be sure to make a good book, though he had never met with a single big adventure."

A favorite tenet—one that many of Riley's friends disavowed, Myron Reed among them—was this, that at heart the rich and eminent do *not* think the lives of the humble unimportant. Riley often said with Mr. Dooley that, barring the fact of education and occupation, king, czar, potentate, rich man, poor man, beggarman and congressman had all been poured out of the same peck measure. The poor were mistaken in thinking that distinction forgets the rounds on the ladder by which it ascends. Carnegie was once a bobbin boy in a cotton mill. Though enormously rich he must, by virtue of his being a member of the human family, be always interested in stories or songs about other bobbin boys. His heart was on the left side. Let a poet write a song, a truthful one, about those inhabitants in the north end of Boston and the clean-shaven, silk-robed procession in Tremont Street would buy it.

> "The humble and poor become great,
> And from brown-handed children
> Grow mighty rulers of state"—

authors, artists, inventors and scholars, the wealthy and the wise, rising as always from the rank and file of to-day to walk in the silk-robed procession of to-morrow. The true man does not blush for humble beginnings; hence his interest in the literature that feeds the spiritual life of the plain people.

It was his sense of values in common things that aroused Riley to the defense of dialect. "The men and women who speak dialect," wrote a savage critic, "are not worth portraying in literature. It is preposterous in writers to think they can get close to nature by depicting the sterile lives and limited emotions of proletarians who speak only to tangle their tongues and move only to fall over their feet."

"The people who speak dialect," returned Riley, "are as capable of heroism as college men or ladies of fashion. Their lives are not sterile. Their emotions are not limited. Love of nature, sympathy for the suffering, and the capacity for affection are not limited to grammarians. Men and women who speak elegantly are not the only ones made in the image of God."

There were times when the sting of the literary hornets—"the old-fashioned, brocaded, base-burning critics," as Nye called them—was more than Riley could stand. At such times the newspaper office was his refuge. The reporters did not "blow him up." "I am writing this poetry, this folk lore," he said to one of the boys, "because of the feeling I have that the poets are not writing songs for the plain people. They are writing for the classically educated. I do not understand them and I know there are many others who do not understand them. I feel that there are

just as lovely things to write about now, and just as lovely things to paint as there were ages ago—if anything, better, for God is still in His world, and it is fair to presume that He has improved a great many things. I do not blame the people of my native town for their bad humor when foreign correspondents come to talk about the monotony of small stores, uninteresting streets, country wagons, traders, loungers, and then return to Chicago or the East to say that there is nothing in the town inviting to poetic genius. It is the want of poetry in their own heart, their own fault, that they did not see the draperies of cloud and shadow and color the Creator hangs over Greenfield every day. Wherever there is a street, a wood, or a brook with a child at play in it, there is a poem, and when a man approaches it with the right spirit, he will find it, no matter how rough the exterior. Every Hoosier bush is afire with God, but only he who sees takes off his shoes."

Riley was strongly of the opinion that every one loves poetry, but the people, he thought, are quick to disclaim any such liking when charged with it. In his best moments every man acknowledges a sense of the beautiful. If we talk to him in foreign vocabularies, in an affected style, and in figures and phrases drawn from libraries, we are talking about things he does not understand. "So I talk of the things of to-day," Riley said:

"The Golden Age! Oh, turn the page
Of history! I 'low
We have as good a Golden Age—
The Golden Age of Now!"

Naturally Riley talked of poetry when he visited Longfellow. "The world," said Longfellow, "your great world there in the West, is teeming with beautiful themes. Your poets will never exhaust them." "I understood then," said Riley afterward, "as I had vaguely surmised before, that Longfellow always saw the poetic in the thing that was nearest to him. He made constant use of it. Passing that through the workshop of his wonderful imagination, he had blessed the world with immortal poems."

With the publication of his first volumes Riley began to think more seriously of his place in American literature, encouraged, no doubt, by an editorial in the Chicago *Herald.* At this writing when the East no longer holds the artistic West in contempt, the passion of the *Herald* provokes a smile, but it was not a smiling matter a quarter-century ago. "The cultured circles of the world," said the *Herald,* "should cease to affect surprise when something good in literature comes out of the West. Why should one be surprised that the birthplace of a poet is in a country town? What clime is alone congenial to the birth and fostering of genius? What locality can be recommended as sure to produce phenomena in literature? What land has produced great men only, and what winds have fanned the brows of great women only? It is proper to note that genius scorns birth and condition, and flames up in utter disregard of the canons of culture. The men who have given the world its entertainment have come from the ends of the earth and have been citizens in the republic of mind, not because they saw the same landscape and ate the same dishes as their judges, but because there was in them that

which bid defiance to geography and convention and brought from obscurity the credentials to fame. James Whitcomb Riley emerged from a past too obscure to be interesting to eastern writers, and yet a few touches of his lance have gained him a place on the pavilion of letters. The people have accepted him. He speaks to the world in tuneful measures and the world is glad to listen.

"Genius is genius," the *Herald* concluded, "no matter where it is born, no matter where it is bred. It comes to fruition without regard to teaching and sets new standards everywhere. It is time to serve notice that genius never seeks a congenial clime and that it does not wait to have its copy set, but makes the model the world approves. It is time to say that it may be looked for in the West as in the East, in the country as in the town—time to say that he who betrays surprise at the locality of its fame, advertises his own ignorance, prejudice, and sophistry."

Although "tuneful measures" had gushed from his heart, there was always for Riley the sad memory of days when the world had not listened to him, days of doubt, pathetic days.

Late in life he related to his secretary the story of a little Scotch play in which in one scene villagers placed wreaths and garlands on a monument to the village poet, who had not been appreciated while among them, and had wandered away to die. Over and over Riley pictured to himself such a fate; night after night he had wondered whether the public would appreciate his song. In this connection he related J. G. Holland's wonderful story of "Jacob Hurd's Child," —one of the first poems he ever read—a child born in

witchcraft times. The baby was filled with a curious, intangible spirit that wove for it a little world of its own, where it lived and dreamed and talked with strange, wonderful people, and knew strange, wonderful things. Coming home from a day in the meadows with its cheeks flushed and its eyes big with miracles it had seen and heard, it would tell its father and mother what had happened to it alone among the flowers. The Puritan father and mother were horrified. The child's vision was an illusion. It had seen nothing and heard nothing. Soon it was whispered about that the child was a witch. In the end the child died of a fever, and the parents never knew what they had possessed and what they had lost.

"Well," said Riley, "in the days when my future was misty I was that child. In my own weak way I had the gift of prophecy. I was not made like others." His thoughts were weird and wild. He told marvelous stories. The saddle and bridle on the horse he rode blazed with jewels. He garnered a curious wisdom—

> "And many were the times
> When he sat in the sun the livelong day
> And sang to himself in rhymes."

Would the people love his rhymes as he had loved them, or would they disregard them, think them too common and ordinary for applause? Would the public smite him as the Puritan father in an evil moment had smitten his child? Was there a reward for faith in visions and loyalty to purpose, or was his fate to be disastrous? He did not know. The tor-

tures of the wheel and the rack! What were they compared to mental agonies over such uncertainties.

In 1893 there came a letter from Rudyard Kipling that would have been a glorious windfall in Riley's days of doubt and gloom. "I remember it," said Riley, some years after receiving it; "and I remember my reflections. I had been praised by one of the most exacting men in literature. He called a spade a spade. Another thing I remember. There was Kipling, twenty-seven years old, the author of eleven volumes, while I, going on forty-five, was crowing over my little family of seven. Still another thing to his credit. He had been brave enough to marry, and best of all had had the courage to come to America for his bride. Your little bench-leg singer, on the other hand, was still moaning under his old sign at Lone Tree. Everybody was praying and plotting for him, heart and soul, like Congress on a pension bill, but failing miserably to find the cardinal device in the ceremony—a woman who would like to have a poet for a husband."

Riley had sent a set of his books to Kipling, who wrote from Vermont: "Your Seven Brothers came sooner than I thought. It is not for me to criticize the merits of the same, but 'I wish to remark and my language is plain' that I am very sick of digging up radishes every twenty minutes to see how their poor little roots are getting on; and sweating and swearing and clucking in print over the nature and properties and possibilities of the American literature that is to be. Therefore, when I find a man sitting down and singing what his life is round him and his neighbors' lives, as a poet sees them with their ideas and

their hopes and their fears all properly set out and plotted and calculated for his particular section of the country, I rejoice with a great joy because half a dozen poems of that kind are worth as near as I can make it out four and three-quarters tons of the precious, self-conscious, get-on-to-my-curves stuff that is solemnly put forward as the great American exhibit. What you write incidentally of the Hoosier holds good for country life over a large area. That is why my farmer next door approves of 'The Frost on the Punkin,' and why I hug myself over 'Coon-Dog Wess.' Also why I choke over 'Mahala Ashcraft'—and because I don't know why I choke I am moderately sure that there is a poet at the keyboard. Go on, in Allah's name, go on!"

Years later Henry Van Dyke came West to address the Indiana Teachers' Association. It seemed to Riley that his friend had come out of the Orient to say a final word on the subject. "It is a great thing," said Van Dyke in part to the Association, "for one who lives away off on the eastern coast to come to this Middle West, where it is easier to find that which is so much talked about—the true American spirit. This is the section where that spirit is—I will not say rampant—but where it is triumphant and still on top. I do not suppose there is any place in the United States to-day where people are more thoroughly alive and in earnest in regard to the burning problem of our land than they are here.

"And what is that problem and question? It is whether a government of the people and by the people and for the people shall really endure upon the earth. And the answer to that question—now don't think it

strange—depends upon whether poetry and that for which poetry stands, is going to survive in the hearts of the American people. I believe it will survive. More and more the people will care for poetry. The peasant in his cottage has his ballad; the fisherman upon the Arctic Sea has his chant; the philosopher has his treasury of song that lies close to his heart. There is not a far region of this world, amid the polar seas or beneath the burning sun of the equator, where some dauntless explorer has not carried in his pocket some volume of his loved poetry.

"Poetry preserves for us the glorious memories of history. Through poetry we know the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome. Poetry keeps for us the intimate life, the inner life of the race. Where have we so much of the inner life of Scotland as we have in Burns? So much of New England as we have in Whittier? So much of Indiana as we have in Riley?

"When men talk about the decline of poetry, the extinction of poetry in America, the question is whether America is to be a nation that will grow rich and crumble and disappear, or will it be a nation that will live forever."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE UNFAILING MYSTERY

IT was not the habit of the Hoosier Poet to explain. Again and again his friends saw him as through a glass darkly. At times he took conspicuous pride in concealing his thought and his way of doing things. Many assumptions concerning him remained assumptions. The more his friends sought to know his history the more capriciously he concealed it. In retaliation they took delight in retailing legends and local anecdotes about him. They were apparently quite willing to be deceived. To his co-workers on the Indianapolis *Journal* he was a mystery, not a great mystery, but a mystery nevertheless. "It is a wonder now," wrote Anna Nicholas on the occasion of his death, "that he accomplished so much, for it was a standing joke in the *Journal* office that he never worked—that is, that he never knew work as the rest knew it. The time spent at his desk was brief compared to the hours that other more commonplace writers found necessary. And yet a look at the sixteen volumes of his poems shows that he did work."

Authors also knew not what to make of it. "I have not words," wrote Joseph Knight from London in the 'nineties, "to express my admiration of your work, nor my astonishment, how in the course of a journalistic career, you found time to throw off those beautiful lyrics in such quick succession."

While employed on the Anderson *Democrat* Riley wrote "The Frog," which hopelessly entangled the speculations of his companions. "What is this thing you call the frog?" they asked. "The poet," Riley answered, more seriously than they surmised. "Don't you know that a poet lives an amphibious life? We think the frog should drown in water; he does not—just why I can not explain. Nor can I explain the two lives of the poet. For instance, the poet sees things in the night that his brethren of the day do not see nor believe. The Night

> "Under her big black wing
> Tells him the tale of the world outright
> And the secret of everything.

And sometimes when the poet is in the grip of old Giant Despair, in a deep well, for instance, and knows not how to get out, he can see through the sky, see through it as he sees through a pane of glass, and thus see stars in the heavens that denizens of the day do not see. Seeing heavenly things he is thus enabled to see human things—

> "All paths that reach the human heart,
> However faint and dim,
> He journeys, for the darkest night
> Is light as day to him."

Often to the casual observer, Riley did not seem to be at work. "No," he would say to reporters, "I am not doing anything now; just nibbling a few literary caramels." Later he would say to a friend, "They do not seem to understand that when a writer is doing

nothing, just smoldering,' so to say, he is actually doing his hardest work. Even the old industrious Sam Johnson took pride in being an idle fellow."

Later in Riley's career two questions called persistently for answer—*When* and *How* did he write his poems? He wrote them in "the ambrosial dark," wrote them while his companions slept, wrote them as Longfellow did with a feather stolen from the sable wing of night. "At night," he once remarked, "the moments for a poet are supreme. Then angels listen to the whisper of his pencil as he writes."

The habit was formed at a very early date. While painting signs for local merchants he slept with the night watchman in the old Greenfield Bank. If the watchman woke at midnight he usually found the Painter Poet sitting by a dim lamp with a pencil and tablet in his hand. When warned against the loss of sleep he waved his hand for silence and went on writing.

Poor Richard told the folks of his time that the night created thoughts for the day to hatch. Riley reversed the order—the sleep of the day creating thoughts for the night to hatch. "I do my writing almost entirely by night," he remarked to an editor, "sleeping several hours during the day and resting the remainder of the time. I just dote on writing one lonesome poem all at once, and believe me, the night is the time to write it. A hungry dog with a new bone is not happier than I am when hinged to a poem at two o'clock in the morning. People have the impression that I do not work—I work while they sleep. Although I may lose several pounds, I get better re-

sults." In his "Open Letter" to Benj. S. Parker the poet's hand creeps along the page while others sleep:

"All the night for him holds naught
But wakefulness and weary thought;
A hand that wavers and grows wan
On its long journey toward the dawn
That often breaks upon his sight
As drear and barren as the night;
A hand that writes of smiling skies
Pressing the lids of rainy eyes
Between the lines of joy and glee
Born out of gloom and agony."

The night was a benediction, a great presence. Sorrow vanished, or if it remained, the night like a sympathetic mother gently laid her hand on the fevered brow. "The dead of night was the noon of thought."

In "The Morgue," the night was God's shadow. "I will remember thee upon my bed," he would whisper, "and meditate on thee in the night watches. In the shadow of thy wings will I praise thee with joyful lips"—which being interpreted meant that he would meditate in rapture on nameless visions of beauty and simplicity and love—the gifts of God to the poet for poems.

At night Riley inclined to inanimate objects as if they were alive. Such was his fancy when writing in the "Crow's Nest." In the Seminary Homestead there was a quaint old clock in a huge cherry case,

"Where seconds dripped in the silence
As the rain dripped from the eaves."

It talked to him and gathered secrets from folks during the day for his use at night. "Its whisperings," said he, "could be heard all over the house, and when its bell broke the silence of midnight it woke up the frogs and water bugs on the banks of Brandywine. Long-buried thoughts stole from their graves and came to haunt me."

The poet did his best work in the late watches of the night. "Then the pageant of commercial life did not molest me," said he. "Time was unsoiled. It had a dove's wing and a silken sound. Almost always I heard the clock strike four. Often a very tuneful sentiment came to the door of my lips:

'Four by the clock! and yet not day;
But the great world rolls and wheels away,
With its cities on land, and its ships at sea,
Into the dawn that is to be!' "

It is in the interest of accuracy to add that Riley did not keep abnormal hours after his "three weeks at a stretch" had terminated, and the vehemence, the lofty ecstasy of creative passion had subsided. "Then," he said, "the mercury dropped from 104 degrees to temperate, and my sleeping hours met the legal requirements."

In the night he exchanged greetings with the days and the friends gone by. Lost companions came and built near him the fire of companionship. Sometimes he was serious with them; at other times quite whimsical. "You don't believe in ghosts," he remarked late in life to his secretary—"well, I do. Indeed it is easier to believe than not to believe in them. The lad I was when I stood in the solitude of the woods, by

GREENFIELD THE MORNING AFTER LEE'S SURRENDER

THE OLD MASONIC HALL, GREENFIELD, TO WHICH THE POET RETURNED FOR A PUBLIC READING IN 1896

Tharpe's Pond, comes to associate with me at night. He is not a tangible being, not a body you can touch with a finger, but a vivid presence here in my room nevertheless. He is the ghost of my boyhood self, and when he lingers round, my heart is warm, and I revel in past emotions and bygone times. I tread the scenes of my youth as Dickens did, dig up buried treasures, and revisit the ashes of extinguished fires.

"Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he, laughing, said to me—

" 'Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe,
Sing thy songs of happy cheer'—
So I sung the same again,
While he wept with joy to hear.

" 'Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read'—
So he vanished from my sight;
And I plucked a hollow reed,

"And I made a rural pen,
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs,
Every child may joy to hear."

For a long while Riley was silent as to the authorship of those lines. It gave him pleasure to caress and to hide them. Subsequently he gave a clue, and when the secretary traced them back to William Blake in the favorite *British Painters,* the poet talked freely about what the world terms the fallacies of vision. In youth he had enshrined the lines in his heart. Before

reading the story of Blake, he had begun to live a life of dreamy abstraction. He had always been afflicted with periods of despair, which in turn were succeeded by moments of great exaltation. When a boy at play in the woods, a shadow would descend upon him, and after an hour of gloom end in "exquisite agony." Later he became more susceptible to spiritual influences. He began to see the forms and listen to the voices of the masters of other days. He had flights of genius, or whatever name you may give it, into regions far above the ordinary sympathies of human nature. "Imagine my frenzy," said Riley, "when I read that Blake at twilight hurried to the seashore to hold high converse with the dead. At the seaside he forgot the present; he lived in the past; he formed friendships with Homer and Pindar and Virgil. Great men appeared before him and he talked with them. In golden moments they entrusted him with their confidence.

"And then to think," Riley added vehemently, "of a matter-of-fact biographer, a man who could not paint a dreaming fancy if he tried a thousand years —think of his saying that Blake mistook the vivid figures which swarmed before his eyes for the poets and heroes of old. By what law of the unseen could the chronicler say that celestial tongues had not commanded the artist to work miracles? If anybody writes about me in that way, saying that my dreams were phantoms, just the baseless fabric of a vision, I will come out of my grave and pelt him with the headstone."

On a subsequent evening when the poet was revamping poems, he was more whimsical than serious. At

midnight there was a halt for milk and crackers, and "a little ambrosia" from a stimulating book. "I almost wish," his secretary read from the book, "there were no day; that we could never peep through the blanket of the dark; but always live under those genial influences, which the spirits of the other world have selected as most agreeable for visits to this earth—the witching hour when ghosts and goblins walk." Work continued till three o'clock, the small hour of the new day. Suddenly a Tom cat broke the silence, "yodling and yowling" in his lonely way while he walked the fence beneath the window. Riley listened for several moments, his head still bending over his work. "Edgar Allan Poe!" he drawled out, to which the secretary added—"the witching hour when ghosts and goblins walk."

To Riley the night was a guest that had been lingering somewhere in space, and had come down the pathways of dusk to greet him on the threshold. "Do you know," he writes in his sketch, "Eccentric Mr. Clark," "that the night is a great mystery to me—a great mystery! To me the night is like some vast, incomprehensible being. When I write the name 'night' I instinctively write it with a capital. And I like my nights deep and dark and swarthy. Some like clear and starry nights, but they are too pale for me—too weak and fragile altogether! They are popular with the masses, of course, these blue-eyed, golden-haired moonlight-on-the-lake nights; but, someway I do not stand in with them. My favorite night is the pronounced brunette—the darker the better."

Precisely as "Mr. Clark" did, the poet drifted into the deepening gloom and was swallowed up in it—lost

utterly. He wanted to "wade out into the darkness and knead it in his hands like dough."

In "The Flying Islands" the poet was a king, and the "lovely blackness the densest of all mysteries"—a mother or a sweetheart come to fold him away in the arms of love—

"Oft have I looked in your eyes, O Night—
Night, my Night, with your rich black hair!—
Looked in your eyes till my face waned white
And my heart laid hold of a mad delight
That moaned as I held it there
Under the deeps of that dark despair—
Under your rich black hair."

The night was a great mystery, but there was another, and that was the poet's inability to account for the poem after it was written. When he was asked to explain such "poetic fungi," as "Craqueodoom," which drew a tide of criticism and inquiry to his desk in the Anderson *Democrat* office, his reply, some thought, was as mysterious as the mystery he attempted to explain:

I feel that I place myself in rather a peculiar position, (he said, in an open letter in the *Democrat*). However, in doing so, I can but trust to escape the incessant storm of inquiries hailed so piteously upon me since the appearance of the poem—or whatever it is.

As to its meaning—if it has any—I am as much in the dark and as badly worried over its incomprehensibility as any one who may have inflicted himself with the reading of it; in fact, more so, for I have in my possession now not less than a dozen of a similar character; and when I say they were only composed mechanically, without apparent exercise of my

thought, I find myself at the threshold of a fact which I can not pass.

I can only surmise that such effusions emanate from long and arduous application—a sort of poetic fungus that springs from the decay of better effort. It bursts into being of itself and in that alone do I find consolation.

The process of such composition may furnish a curious fact to many, yet I am assured every writer of either poetry or music will confirm the experience I am about to relate.

After long labor at verse, you will find there comes a time when everything you see or hear, touch, taste or smell, resolves itself into rhyme, and rattles away till you can not rest. I mean this literally. The people you meet upon the streets are so many disarranged rhymes and only need proper coupling. The boulders in the sidewalk are jangled words. The crowd of corner loafers is a mangled sonnet with a few lines lacking. The farmer and his team an idyl of the road, perfected and complete when he stops at the picture of a grocery and hitches to an exclamation point.

This is my experience, and at times the effect upon both mind and body is exhausting in the extreme. I have passed as many as three nights in succession without sleep—or at least without mental respite from this tireless something which

> "Beats time to nothing in my head
> From some odd corner of the brain."

I walk, I run, I writhe and wrestle with it, but I can not shake it off. I lie down to sleep, and all night long it haunts me. Whole cantos of incoherent rhymes dance before me, and so vividly at last I seem to read them as from a book. All this is without will power of my own to guide or check: and then occurs a stage of repetition—when the matter becomes

rhythmically tangible at least, and shapes itself into a whole, of sometimes a dozen stanzas, and goes on repeating itself over and over till it is printed indelibly in my mind.

This is the history of the "Craqueodoom." I have theorized in vain. I went gravely to a doctor on one occasion, and asked him seriously if he did not think I was crazy. His laconic reply that he "never saw a poet who was not!" is not without consolation. I have talked with numerous writers regarding my strange affliction, and they invariably confirm a like experience, only excepting the inability to recall these Gipsy changelings of a vagrant mind.

Very truly,

J. W. RILEY.

"Call me Little Man," Riley once remarked, "or Mr. Clickwad, or any other name you like, but don't forget I am your old friend and well-wisher, the Adjustable Lunatic." In the prose sketch of that title he is puzzled and bewildered over his compositions. "No line of them but canters through his brain like a fractious nightmare. No syllable but fastens on his fancy like a leech, and sucks away the life blood of his very thought. He is troubled, worried, fretted, vexed and haunted; and hopes wiser minds will have the opportunity of making his literary foundlings the subject of investigation."

A luscious bit of verse was, in several respects, as miraculous to Riley as apples blushing in orchard trees. "Poems grow, you know, like potatoes and other vegetables," he said, "but some of them ripen more slowly than others, and some have scab on them and decay before they are ready to pull."

In his later years the mystery about his poems had not vanished as seen in the following from Evanston, Illinois:

Dear friend and brother—For such you seem to us all, who confess with honest gratitude your "touch of Nature that makes the whole world kin"—my first thought on reading the enclosed this morning. We all cried as a matter of course. The question was, "How James Whitcomb Riley could tell that to the world." Maybe you will not feel called to answer it, but I send this for your reading all the same, and am with thanks for lovely, genial thoughts,

Your friend sincerely,

FRANCES WILLARD.

The illustrious woman and her friends had been touched by the consoling "Bereaved." Never in her opinion had the grief of childlessness found such expression—

"In an empty room she read it;
As she read it, wept and smiled—
She who never was a mother
Felt within her arms the child."

She was constrained to believe that such verse would last "while this world is a world, and there exists in it human souls to kindle at the touch of genius, and human hearts to throb with human sympathies." In this connection she had asked a question the poet could not answer. "I was awakened far in the night as by a summons," he told her afterward, "and in seeming answer I arose and the poem came trickling through my tears. What it was that woke me I can not tell. Was it the pitying gaze of

fathers and mothers keeping their lonely vigil through the night? Was it the cry of empty arms for the touch of vanished fingers? Was it an angel ray of light, a celestial petition from the land of dreams and sleep? I do not know."

In the same way about the same time he was summoned to write "The Poet of the Future." "One evening when I had an engagement," he explained, "I felt too restless and worn to fulfill it; so I asked my friends to excuse me. I went to bed expecting a good rest, thinking I should have been there long before. I had not had more than a moment's peace when I found I could not stay there. I saw something and I could no more lie still than I could fly. It was the thread of gold—*His face to heaven, and the dew of duty on his brow*—a good line and I knew it. I wrote the poem before midnight, and after a week's severe revision sent it to the *Century*."

In similar vein the poet gave a clue to the origin of the beloved "Away." The poem occasioned many letters and newspaper comments. "I was confined to my bed," he wrote a friendly editor. "I was ill and weak and all alone. My eyes were inflamed, and so I just rolled over and wept with the weather."

The poem had been written after the death of General William H. H. Terrell, who, as an aid to Governor O. P. Morton, had rendered distinguished service to his country in the Civil War. Not less important, in Riley's opinion, was the fact that the General gave "the sweetest love of his life to simple things." While walking in a garden after a shower Riley observed the General stoop to pity "a honey-bee wet with rain."

"I value my poems," Riley once said, "not because

they are mine but because they are not." The remark should not occasion a shock. There was the "hammering process," the "carpenter work," in the making of poems, but that did not account for them, any more than the night accounted for the light of a star. The poet was once told that Henry Ward Beecher preached his wonderful sermons while in a trance. "True as Gospel," added Riley—"the miracle of genius in the pulpit which the preacher himself could not explain. When I talk to Lew Wallace I am not talking to the author of *Ben Hur*. That book was an inspiration and Wallace was the instrument of the inspiration. We say the farmer raised a crop of corn. Not at all. He was just an instrument along with a host of others for the transmission of the poem to the farm, for that is what a cornfield is—a poem. Fairies worked with him in the field. Far away in the tropics they worked for him all summer. Watery particles traveled a thousand miles to contribute to his success. Unlike him, the fairies did not rest from their labors. While he slept they refreshed the air and filled his spring with sparkling water. While he plowed, the fairy power of precipitation was at work in the clouds on the horizon. What had he to do with the shower that drifted to his neighborhood late in the afternoon? No, he is not the author of the poem. He could not hang a cloud in the sky if he tried a million years. Impulses prompt me to write but I am not the author of them:

> " 'Nor is it I who play the part,
> But a shy spirit in my heart
> That comes and goes—will sometimes leap
> From hiding places ten years deep.' "

"One thing, Mr. Riley, I do not understand," a young woman once said to him, "and that is where you get all the little stories for your poems." He answered in a vague way, telling her that poets, like other folks, had to find their own material and board themselves.

"It would have been no use to tell her," he remarked to a friend after she had gone, "that God made the little stories, and that He has given me ability to see them a little plainer than some others, and endowed me with skill to sketch them so that my readers can see them clearly. And I have to be very watchful," he added shrewdly, "not to work in too much Riley, as that would mar the beauty of the poem."

Humility and reverence, as he saw it, should be the spirit of the poet. Thus Bryant's "Waterfowl" became a favorite poem. There was a Power whose care directed his footsteps as it did the flight of the bird along a pathless coast. Should the chosen guide, as Wordsworth wrote, be nothing but a wandering cloud he could not lose his way.

For a similar reason Newman's "Pillar of Cloud" became a favorite hymn. Its ending, Riley regarded as the two most poetic lines in hymnology. "Their very simplicity," he said, "is divine." Often when his path was enveloped in darkness, he prayed for the Kindly Light to lead him amid the encircling gloom:

> "Keep thou my feet! I do not ask to see
> The distant scene—one step enough for me."

"Geographies," said he, "tell about the tides that fill bays and estuaries on the coasts of continents.

There are other tides. On never-ending ministrations of love and delight they flow between heaven and earth —those heavenward bearing tidings from earth, those earthward bearing tidings from heaven, and the man who denies their existence is to be pitied as we pity the man far inland, who takes exception to the sea tides because their waves do not reach him. Invisible messages as Longfellow shows flow to us on these tides, the murmurs of the rapture and woe we call the poet's songs. There too is the cry, the transport of the departed, seeking happier climes, and

> " 'From their distant flight
> Through realms of light
> It falls into our world of night,
> With the murmuring sound of rhyme.'

Depend upon it, those promptings from the unknown come unbidden, and when they come, all suddenly, the poet is transported to an upper realm."

Referring to the popular poems, "The Legend Glorified," "The Harper," "The Pixy People," "The Beautiful City," and "Her Beautiful Eyes," Riley told a reporter that he "did not make them. God made them," said he; "all that I do is to fit the words to them. I am a sort of a mental camera, that catches the stories. I develop the plate—and there you are. And just here I must protest against the opinion of our dear Longfellow who claims that it is sheer laziness in a poet to refrain from writing because he is not in the mood. As I see it, he who attempts to write when not in the mood prostitutes his powers.

" 'Do not strain the chords of thought;
The sweetest fruit of all desire
Comes its own way, and comes unsought.'

I never know whether I can write another good thing or not—but what am I saying? I never *wrote* anything. I *found* it."

In Portland, Oregon, a schoolboy asked the poet whether he laid any claim to inspiration, and whether he was *wholly* or in *part* the author of "A Remarkable Man." He assured the lad there were symptoms of inspiration. "The story," he said, "would not be put off nor take *no* for an answer. It simply *made* me do it. It *borned itself*, you can most truthfully tell your teacher—and just like America here when Columbus 'hopped her up out of the brush.' "

The poet was touring the Pacific Slope (December, 1892). To a San Francisco reporter he affirmed that a writer, if he has a message for the people, is driven to his life-work by an inexorable law. "I wanted to be a painter, a musician, an editor, an actor," he said. "The Fates said No, and it took rough boxing and cudgelling to bring me round to their view. In youth your own Bret Harte was lured to this Golden West. He wanted to be a miner. Failing in that he tried school-teaching, the express business and the newspaper office. The Fates had to thump the young man twenty years before he saw that his Golden Fleece was the Man at the Semaphore, the Fool of Five Forks, Jack Hamlin, and the sunset on Black Spur."

With Riley, disclaiming authorship of a book or a poem was not just the whim or privilege of a day or a year. It was constitutional. "I am only the reed

that the whistle blows through," was his habitual remark. The poet's gift, he averred, is "from the Creator and should be used by the Creator. The poet is the violin from whose soul is lured melody by the touch of a master hand." Booth Tarkington observes that Riley "never outgrew his astonishment that he happened to be what he was; he was always in surprise that he, instead of another, had been the reed selected by the cosmic musician." Anna Nicholas confirms the novelist's observation. "Riley had no exalted idea of his ability," she writes; "on the contrary he lacked self-confidence. His literary success, I think, surprised him more than any one else. He was immensely pleased of course, and recognition in high literary quarters gave him boyish satisfaction, which he frequently expressed; but he did not altogether understand it or realize that what he produced with such ease and in such perfection was through a power above and beyond himself. He did not see that it was genius. More than once he said to me, half laughing, but still serious: 'It is all a bluff. I have them hypnotized.' Riley was a man of moods. His writing power was not at his command. He wrote when inspiration came."

Writing Henry Van Dyke after he was fifty, the poet said, "I have a book for you, which will find you soon. I did not write it, but it is good. Gratefully and with all hale affection, your old friend, James Whitcomb Riley."

Whether at home or in foreign lands, his answer was always the same. "No," he replied to a reporter in the city of Mexico, "I can not say whether I shall write a poem on this tropic land. I never can tell in

advance about what my poetry is to be. I wait for the spirit to move me." And often according to his own testimony he had to wait a long while. "You did not amount to much over here," said an old resident of Greenfield; "we never thought you would come to the front the way you have; we hear you get a dollar a word for your poems." "Yes," returned Riley, "but there are days when I can not think of a single word. Simply, the winds," he explained to his old neighbor, "would not blow."

Though he hung out every rag he could find to the scanty breeze, the barge moved sluggishly. It was like his voyage across the Atlantic: Tuesday and Wednesday, inspiring—weather soft, warm and beautiful. He was near the Gulf Stream. Thursday and Friday, seaweed—just rain and gloom, and then gloom and rain.

The opinion of masters on the subject were uncommonly interesting to Riley. "Who," wrote Elbert Hubbard, "taught Abraham Lincoln and Whitcomb Riley how to throw the lariat of their imagination over us, rope us hand and foot, and put their brand upon us? Yes, that is what I mean—who educated them? God educated them."

"Whose hand smote the lyre of the Scottish Plowman?" asked Henry Watterson. "I don't know."

"No man knows," continued Riley; "you can no more explain Burns than you can explain the dew on the meadow." He went on to describe a man, unlettered and poor, living in a hut with scarcely enough money from week to week to pay for candlelight. He was a poet, but institutions of culture did not believe

it. In some way, a mystery to him as to them, he was commissioned of the Unseen to write lyrics.

Always there was the mystery that so many writers, Joel Chandler Harris, Bret Harte, Mark Twain and others, were not college men. In this connection, the historian, John Clark Ridpath wrote as follows, in 1892: "James Whitcomb Riley has had the good fortune to become what he was born to be—the poet of the human heart. It might be difficult to find another man of Riley's age, belonging to the intellectual classes, who bears about with him so little of that commodity which the bookmen and teachers label education. I sorrow to inform the public that of mathematics and geography, science and the like, our poet has none at all. He is in this respect as poverty-stricken as Shakespeare was in the little matter of Greek. With grief I divulge the fact that to this day Riley does not formally know a nominative from an objective! It is doubtless true that his school-life was a total failure—and so much the better. For it is perfectly clear, in the retrospect, that the formalities of a graded and high school would have confused, and perhaps obscured, what has proved to be the most productive genius of the Mississippi Valley."

In conversation Riley was prone to the use of extravagant figures, when trying to make inspiration intelligible, but he usually ended with the confession that he could not find the key, that with words it was impossible to shed light upon it. Why should *he,* an uncouth youth in a country town, without a glimpse of college life, with no knowledge from books of the laws of versification, syntax as obscure as the origin

of man, figures of rhetoric a tanglewood of riddles, iambic measures and heroic couplets as unintelligible as hallelujah meters—why should *he* be the instrument?

From first to last Riley was radiant with gratitude when he could come from his study with the good word that the Seraph had drifted through his dreams and filled the chancels of his soul with heavenly whisperings. At noon after his work at night, he would tell of melodious refrains with which he had been entranced in his sleep. "Everything I write," he wrote James Newton Matthews, "seems to me as if I had simply found it and had no right to it—that is, with the present ownership of the thing, and I don't think I have. It is exactly on the principle of the dreams I have had—dreams that were mine undeniably, but I in no wise responsible for their mental construction—therefore with no right to claim any of their excellence in that particular, an excellence sometimes extraordinary. In dreams I have built pages and pages of marvelous verse that floated before the mental vision as smooth and pure and lucid as the clearest print—verse that charmed the author at times with excellently molded sentences of purest poetry, that he dwelt upon and extolled and read again and again. All that is the dream's composition and the poet did not write a line of it and can not claim it, can not claim it at least when he wakes in the morning,

"Like a drowsy boy that lingers
With a dream of pleasure rare,
And wakens with his fingers
Grasping only empty air.

"That is my theory, and I am only proud because I have found the poem. I found one this afternoon, 'A Glimpse of Pan,' and it has tickled me half to death, and I am going to copy it for you and go to bed."

Writing the gifted Madison Cawein, he said, "Your genius has my profoundest admiration. In this endowment God himself is manifest in you—and hence with what divine humility must you combat the Evil One, and with what care guard the great truth from any touch too merely human. Give nothing to it but pure joy, and beauty, and compassion, and tenderness: a Christ-like laying on of hands on brows that ache and wounds that bleed, fainting from pain, and worn and weary."

"Everybody's learning all the time," Riley was wont to say. "Never any venture of my life was any more than a trial at some attainment—an experiment—not a forecast certainty of accomplishment. The fact is, keeps me duly humble, and ought to. Whatever good is wrought is not our doing—it is *through* us, not *of* us. And that is what God wants to beat in us, and when we just won't have it so, why, then He lets loose of us that we may see, and the whole united populace as well, that here is another weighed-and-found-wanting candidate for enduring glory."

Ascending the scale, there was in the invisible around him a melody born of Melody, which as Emerson had said, melts the visible world into a sea. In that world of mystery and miracle there was no gradation. All was music. The poet's function was to record the "primal warblings." The sorrow of sorrows was that he could never wholly fling himself

into the enchanted circle, never wholly surrender his will to the Universal Power.

According to Riley the poet was not a poet until he was in tune with the Infinite Melody. Indeed, he went so far as to say that, in the poetic sense, the poet was not a man. He himself was not a man when not poetic in thought and spirit. The "primal warblings" were not his handiwork. They were beyond the height or effort of art. They were the gift of God. "That they ravish the heart of an inferior man like me," he said, "is evidence that God intends them for the whole of mankind."

CHAPTER XIX

BUILDING BOOKS

BETWEEN the *Rhymes of Childhood* (1890) and *The Book of Joyous Children* (1902) lay the period of book building,—"my appeal to the appreciative majority," he expressed it,—"not the effort to tickle the ears of a half dozen cynics in the front row." Insistent was the call—and he answered it. Books should speak for him. "A new book?" an old Greenfield friend would ask. "I hope so," Riley would reply. "This old home atmosphere is worth preserving; it is passing quickly away and will soon be gone."

While he was on the road in the 'eighties he had not given to his books the personal attention they deserved. In 1890 when new plates were made for the revised *Pipes o' Pan* and *Afterwhiles* his book decade may be said to have begun. Annually after that his audience expected a new volume. "I am a very busy man," he remarked to an Omaha reporter in 1897, "but there must be some mistake about it for I was never inclined to be industrious. You have no idea how lazy I can be. You see I am more or less jealous of my reputation. Years ago I made a scratch hit with a little book and since then I have been trying to keep people thinking they were right in their first judgment."

"Printers are snowing me under with proofs," he wrote Madison Cawein, "and my intellect, such as it

is, is tottering on its kinky-springed and lumpily-upholstered throne. Actually I have a bank account. I not only publish a book but get something out of it, and—when my brother-in-law looks after the proceeds—I hold on to some of them. It means that I was made to do the monkeyshines—not to take in the gate money and flop it down on the table and hold it there."

"It is comforting to know you are not dead yet," he wrote a friend in Nebraska (November, 1890). "God bless and keep you in the earthly ranks till I drop out anyhow! Just now I am given over wholly to the book-habit. They are multiplying by litters, like white mice! There is such a demand in fact that I fear to turn away—lest my luck let up and flop over and die on the flat of its back. My best prayers are with you always. Not in my prosperity is any friend forgot—the poorest one of all is my superior, whether in Congress or in jail."

A month later he wrote Ras Wilson, the Quiet Observer of the Pittsburgh *Gazette,* and one of the poet's most loyal friends:

December 29, 1890.

Dear friend Wilson:

By this time I know you are beginning to suspect me not only of neglect but base ingratitude, but neither am I guilty of, in the least. Simply the Christmas season has been here—*and so have I.*

Ah, my dear man! how I bless you for your treatment of *Rhymes of Childhood,* and how I want to show you letters from the most exacting of the Nation's literary celebrities indorsing virtually your every word of commendation and welcome. Truly the venture is a great "go"—and up to date the pressmen and the binders can't keep up with the demand. This,

too, seems to have roused up an older interest, so that, shoulder to shoulder, my earlier books are swept clean out of market, and newer thousands of them are again being ground out of the great literary sausage machine.

As ever your grateful friend,
J. W. RILEY.

Again and again he declined flattering lecture invitations. As Agassiz had said, he could not *waste his time in money-making.* In 1892 he requested a magazine editor to return promptly all unprinted poems. "I must shift for 'em right away," he wrote. "Am gittin' oldish-like and must be a-humpin' 'fore rumatiz sets in." Five years later he was still busy but considerably the worse for the wear and tear.

April 16, 1897.

Dr. William C. Cooper (of Cleves, Ohio).
Dear old friend:

Your most heartening poem is simply getting hugged. Don't know how to control my feelings in anything like decorum when all at once called upon to face so generous a tribute. Can't you send a little homeopathic poet your formula? I've got patients, and fees, all waiting, but I'm clean run out of the curative essence, so to speak. God gives nuts to those who have no teeth, you know, and now that my poetry is over-besought and over-valued I could not apprehend a rhyme for *dove* without a bench warrant!

As always your affectionate Jamesie.

August 17, 1897.

W. C. Edgar, Esq., Minneapolis.
Dear Mr. Edgar:

It is good of you to invite still another contribution from me, but alas, I fear you have "come to a goat's house for wool." I don't believe *Pinkerton* could find,

just now, another rhyme in my entire anatomy. Otherwise most gladly would I do my level-best for you. Have just finished a new book, and must lie down somewhere in the shade and pant.

As ever your friend,
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

After his prime, in what he jokingly called "the venerable and time-honored epoch" of his career, Riley repeatedly referred to himself as the "homeopathic poet." His friends did not know what he meant, but there was no doubt in his own mind. It was anxiety over his vanishing youth. "The comb begins to pull," he said once while revising poems for a new volume. "There is molasses in my ambrosial curls. Not half so much fun to run a lawn mower the last ten minutes as when you first take hold of the machine."

As the sales of his books grew, grew beyond his wildest fancy, he was beset by soft temptations, such as ease and wealth. He realized that a subtle indolence was stealing over him. Like Burdette he had reached the age when he exaggerated difficulties. "Proofs of the book began to arrive Saturday," Burdette wrote in 1897, referring to one of his own volumes. "As I read it, you know how I wish I had said it this way; then sleep on it and decide to leave it as it was, then change it back; then get disgusted with the whole thing; finally decide not to publish the book; then think I might do it under a *nom de plume* so that nobody would know who wrote the truck; and at last in desperation let it go back to the publisher, saying, Dumb the difference, let it go."

And it was thus with Riley as he grew older. Poems were sent to magazines and occasionally a book slipped

from his study without receiving the attention that he had given his work in former years. And so he became a target for the critic. "He has bound the poems together in a book," wrote one,—"the pebbles and the pearls on one string, and the author seems to have perverse affection for the pebbles."

For many years Riley aspired to build a book (to use his own language) as a mason would construct a stone wall, a book that would stand true from the first and need no rebuilding. He never realized that dream. To the last, portions of the wall, and once the whole structure had to be torn down and rebuilt.

Riley was an indefatigable worker. "Simply it is not my fate," he wrote Major Charles Holstein, "ever to have any real genuine rest or leisure in this world. I have been noticing this fatality for many a long year; and while you may smile at this 'fool-fancy' of mine, as it is generally believed to be, none the less I know it is most unwavering and relentless fact. In present instance it is coming in the form of setting me straight on with still another book—the beginning of which, thank God! and outline, has been compassed long ago, so that all that remains of the task is the filling in. And since I am in the spirit and frame of mind, I feel I must do it now, though it will cost me all the interval allowed me for the Holidays. But my health and heroism are both equal to it, and so I square my jaws. Simply I just am not going to fight fate any more—nor am I going to be ungrateful for my seeming trials and deprivations. They are all blessings in disguise. Has not some old poet-saint asseverated, under oath two or three hundred years ago, that

" 'The clouds we so much dread
Are big with mercy and will break
In blessings on our head'?

Anyway I am going cheerfully to take his word for it; and right here and now and straight onward till the book is done, accept the blessed inevitable."

Working at night he kept his secretary awake with such remarks as these:

"A man of average endowment could write books if he would work at it as hard as the author does. There are a thousand and one things to consider. For instance, there is the title—keep both ears and eyes open —would it have been a good title five years ago—will it be a good title ten years hence? It does not require much to write a book, but to name the thing, that takes genius—many a title has made a book successful —I could do a good business creating titles—the editor wanted to change the title; I told him I would have the manuscript returned before I would change it.

"What a fearful thing it is to be the writer of a bad book, Myron Reed used to tell me. The author is dead and sorry but what good does sorrow do? The book is loose. It is like poisoning the neighborhood well.

"In launching a book consider the difficulties and dangers attending its voyage. Whether on sea or on shore, said the old *Tales of the Ocean,* keep a good lookout ahead. An old sea captain maintained that a man has no manly motive for facing dangers unless he has well considered what they are. That done, let the author commit himself and his book to the Higher Powers.

"Here is a flaw for us to whet our beaks upon. If I were to go through these galleys forty years hence I would find corrections to make. What labor it takes to make a tolerable book, and how little the reader knows about that. How wide awake a man must be to judge quietly and wisely of merits and defects.

"I get some things by reflection. I have considered this book from every standpoint. I know what I think of the book. I know what the critics think of it. I know what my relatives think of it. I know the opinion of good men and the man with a disease. I know what the halt and the lame and the blind think of it. I know the opinions of all these before they have seen the book.

"Why go on writing this rubbish? something seems to say. Have I lost the power of invention? I shall not sleep to-night—the book haunts me like a ghost. I could no more forget it than Lincoln could forget his slaves."

Thus the poet talked while he worked, wide-awake as he approached the dawn, while the secretary repressed the heaviness of sleep.

A barrier to bookmaking was the poet's inability to decide things. At times this infirmity would block proceedings for days. An instance was his disposition of "The Old Settler's Story." It was a favorite sketch, the scaffolding for it having come from an old Uncle Tommy at the Oakland Pioneer Meeting in 1878. Its conclusion gave him especial pleasure, "since," he said, "it wrote itself."

But what to do with the story after it had been created—there was the rub. Ten years later it appeared in *Pipes o' Pan.* Twenty years after, it was

transferred to *Neghborly Poems*, "and the Lord only knows what I would do with it," said Riley, "should I return some day to make a call on posterity."

The summer season was the poet's favorite time for bookmaking. "I am always cold in winter," he said. "Having a very thin skin and only about two ounces of blood in my system and that in a very thin state, I feel the cold all the time. When at home in the summer and hard at work on a book while others are at the seashore, striving for enjoyment, I am comfortable. I can enjoy life as well as the rest if I can only work while the perspiration is rolling down my brow and I am glowing generally."

When interviewed, the poet often remarked that he was not a literary man, yet he freely expressed himself on questions of literature. He said things about "the damphool author," and they were usually caustic. He was not seriously alarmed over what seemed to be the degeneration of the public taste, the delight of the masses in light, faddish books, the belief that commercialism was having a baneful influence, and so forth. The masses might wabble but the people make literature; ultimately they were bound to be right. The author should study to please and benefit them—that is what he writes for. Often an author writes his first book to please himself—*mistake number one.* Then he writes a book to please the critics, the fellows that had jumped on his first book—*mistake number two.* Then the author, if he is discerning, writes a book to please the masses, and he finds favor with the public. But he can not do that unless he mingles with the people and finds out what they want. He can not do it by standing aloof; he can not do it by

getting "chesty." The writer must not be too good for human nature and human provender. He must live with the people to be a leader of the people.

Occasionally there was a call from the masses, which he answered reluctantly. An instance was his sonnet, "The Assassin," written after the death of President Garfield. "It was prompted I suppose by fire or brimstone," he said, "for I remember, in making an illustration for it, that I chewed the end of a match, dipped it in ink, and made plumes of smoke rising from the field of retribution, as if the elements were breathing out vengeance with Justice. But it was unlike me to write it, although there was a popular call for it. I remember that I delayed sending it to the *Journal.* Always I have been distinctly ashamed of it."

After *Rhymes of Childhood,* the poet, with rare exceptions, appeared in book form yearly to the end of his publication period. His publishers, then the Bowen-Merrill Company, now the Bobbs-Merrill Company of Indianapolis, continued their old-time fealty. As Riley put it, they kept the ball rolling till his glad day came "wid de blowin' er de bugles and de bangin' er de drums." In order of time the volumes were *Neghborly Poems, Sketches in Prose, Flying Islands of the Night, Green Fields and Running Brooks, Armazindy, Poems Here at Home, A Child-World, Rubaiyat of Doc Sifers, Home-Folks, The Book of Joyous Children, His Pa's Romance,* and *Morning.* In 1897 the *Homestead Edition,* sold by subscription only, was published, through arrangements with the Bobbs-Merrill Company, by Charles Scribner's Sons. Later The Bobbs-Merrill Company published the *Biograph-*

ical Edition and still later the *Memorial Edition,* the complete set of the poet's works in ten volumes. *Poems Here at Home,* and *The Rubaiyat of Doc Sifers* were originally published by the Century Company.

The initial poem in *Armazindy,* illustrated by Will Vawter in the Indianapolis *Journal,* September, 1893, marks the beginning of the poet's good fortune with his artist, whose illustrations have been coextensive with the poet's fame. The pictures not only relate to the text but illuminate it, which can not be said of some illustrations by other artists. Like the poet, Vawter was reared in Greenfield. He knows the value of sunshine and rainy days, and the lesson of homely, human sorrows. "Simply you are divinely ordained to succeed," Riley wrote him at an early day. "As I forecast so you *must prove.*" The artist did succeed. His pictures are redolent with the good old-fashioned days and ways; he has the heart-touch.

The end of the 'nineties marked the beginning of a series of illustrated books, which were received enthusiastically by the book trade and the Riley public. Years before, *Afterwhiles* and *Rhymes of Childhood* had established the reputation of the poet; so that it may be said that magazine attention to Riley and magazine publication of his poems followed, for the most part, the reception of his books. The milestones in his popularity were marked by the appearance of the illustrated books—*Child Rhymes* and *Farm Rhymes* and others in the Deer Creek volumes illustrated by Vawter, the crowning success being *An Old Sweetheart of Mine* in 1902, illustrated by Howard Chandler Christy. This had a tremendous vogue and

The Poet in 1896

At the Hancock County Fair, 1865, a Memory of Early Days in the Poet's Child-World

was followed with equal success by *Out to Old Aunt Mary's, Home Again with Me, The Girl I Loved,* and other titles in the Christy-Riley series.

No mention of the illustrated books should be made, no matter how brief, without a special word of praise for the Franklin Booth Edition of *The Flying Islands of the Night.* Mr. Booth's paintings, in originality of conception and beauty of color, rank with any similar work ever done in this country, and did much to bring this never fully appreciated poem to the better attention of Riley admirers.

The success of the illustrated books verified the faith of the publishers in the poet and his work. At an early date the president of the organization, William C. Bobbs, then one of the company's salesmen, had found the poet's first little volume in a corner book store at Liberty, Indiana, and had predicted for him and his poems a glorious future. That was the day of small things. The illustrated works, due chiefly to the unfailing faith and efforts of the publishing house, distinguished the day of prosperity.

In the early book ventures Dan Paine's counsel was always available. He was aware of what many other friends were not, that Riley had written great poems in his youth. "Lyric poets," he affirmed, "do their greatest work before they are thirty-five." Repeatedly, when Riley was preparing book manuscripts Paine pointed with pride to the past. "Back there in your dreamy days," he once said, "are 'Dot Leedle Boy'—'A Country Pathway'—'Farmer Whipple'—'Tom Van Arden'—'August'—'The Iron Horse'—'Watches of the Night'—'Her Beautiful Eyes'—and other country paper favorites. Roll them up in

dreams together and make a book." Riley did so, and thus *Green Fields and Running Brooks* began its pilgrimage to family bookshelves.

Each book had its own story,—joys, difficulties, and provocations attending its construction. What befell while the poet worked on *A Child-World* suggests his experience with other volumes. "The book is rounding into completion, and very soon I shall hand it to the printers," he wrote Frank M. Nye of Minneapolis. "Meanwhile I am whettin' my hind feet on the gravel of the sidewalk till printers change my line of servitude by snowing me under with proof sheets." Later, followed this letter to Louise Chandler Moulton of Boston:

Indianapolis, August 18, 1896.

My dear friend:

This long silence goes out to you, even as a long captive songster's—free once more in his native woodland haunts, with his rapturous breast again safe in the shadow of the leaves, and his grateful beak song-wide with his first inspiration.

The occasion of my wide-spread delinquency is, of course, another book—which same headstrong thing has insisted upon rhyming, chiming and subliming itself to the other side of 200 pages. And here, seeing it at last in type, I'm wondering, thus belatedly, who else'll want to wade so vast a width of all unbroken verse. And will you venture, sailor-like, across it when I send you first copy of it?

As always your grateful and abiding friend,

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

The characters in *A Child-World* were real characters, the scenes typical scenes of the early day and locality. "Exactly that," said Riley, "but something

more than that. The characters are people that I knew when a child. Several stories were real stories told by children of that day. The book appeals to me, because of its simplicity. We had comparatively little opportunity for entertainment in my town in those days; all we had we had to make first-hand. Nor was this a bad thing, this limited environment, and even a fair acquaintance with poverty, for it makes people self-reliant and keeps them always kindly and most cheeringly sympathetic."

The book contained the popular "Bear Story," which had originated with the poet's little brother, Humboldt Riley. "It was his creation, his one lone masterpiece in fiction," said the poet; "he told it so many times, while we children sat round the fireside, that he came to believe it and could see no inconsistencies in it. On my first trip away from home (with the Standard Remedy vendor) I reproduced it, thinking it might be acceptable for a Christmas entertainment when I should get back home. So it turned out to be. Later it appeared to be pleasing to audiences generally, especially to children, and when I wanted to retire it I could not. So I incorporated it permanently in my reading programs."

On the whole Riley had been happy while working on this new volume. He had been in his world—had been seeking the pictures that hung on the walls of his fancy in his barefoot days. It had been his habit to sleep with childhood books under his pillow. One night while at work on *The Book of Joyous Children* he recalled the scene in Dickens' story of the *Golden Mary,* the little band of passengers adrift in the long-boat on the wide ocean, and the lamentation of the old

man who pinned his faith to the child. "Our sins will sink us," Riley repeated; "we shall founder and go to the devil when we have no innocent child to bear us up." There might be fair mornings and broad fields of sunlight on the waves, but without the love and innocence of children the voyage of life would be in vain. In all his books there were pages for the children. Half of *Armazindy* was given over to "Make-Believe and Child-Play," ending with the little "Envoy"—

"When but a little boy, it seemed
My dearest rapture ran
In fancy ever, when I dreamed
I was a man—a man!

"Now—sad perversity!—my theme
Of rarest, purest joy
Is when, in fancy blest, I dream
I am a little boy."

Simultaneously with its appearance in America, *A Child-World* was published in London. The Riley audience had been growing in England since the advent of *Afterwhiles*, but chiefly since his visit to "a bright little island," as he spoke of it to English friends, "a show-fight little island, and full of merit of all sorts, but not the whole round world." Britishers had been pleased with his frankness as well as with his verse.

Years before, while on the road with Nye, the book business had seemed like a leap in the dark. A London publisher had asked why he did not put the sale of his books in the hands of somebody in England who

would push them properly. "Simply," the poet answered, "because time out of mind the author is in the hands of his publisher and his publisher is in the hands of the Devil. Hundreds of would-be consumers of my books go hungry along with me simply because one publisher will not publish them and another will. At least that's the way it appears to a man up a tree. My sympathy drifts ever to the intrepid firm here in America that print my books, knowing no other house in the world will so courteously handle them. My publishers here, are year after year bravely bringing out another volume 'by the same author' and plugging along as best they can—learning to labor and to wait."

Much more confident was the tone of his letters the year he published *A Child-World*. Prior to that date he had sent by request a set of his books to Charles A. Dana, his old-time sponsor and ally of the New York *Sun*. The *Sun* had given the poet a full-page review. "Here evidently is a man," said the reviewer, "who would have felt the impulse to speak tunefully and to touch the springs of humor and pathos had he lived before the invention of alphabets. In the absence of books, the lessons to be drawn from nature and from human life would have sufficed. With his own hands he has garnered his knowledge of the outer and of the inner world."

The editor himself however had been to the poet the chief source of delight in a personal letter dated

The Sun, New York, March 15, 1894.

Dear Mr. Riley:

By some accident through which the package was misplaced in this office, it is only to-day that I have

received the set of your works sent to me on the 24th ult. But I do not receive them with any less pleasure on that account; and I am especially delighted with the beautiful binding which forms an outward decoration for the genius of the contents. I congratulate you most heartily in a literary success which has had no parallel in my day; and I remain as ever,

Most sincerely and faithfully yours,

CHARLES A. DANA.

With the passing of the years came many letters from England, one from the author of *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush,* which Riley said gladdened the heart as orchard bloom in May.

Sefton Park Church, Liverpool.
17 Croxteth Road,
8th October, 1900.

Dear Whitcomb Riley:

My return to work this autumn was made delightful and the sorrow of a countryman in leaving wood and water for the City was lifted by the delight of finding your works upon my table and reading your name in each volume.

Many an evening this winter after the drudgery of the day is over I will go where the snow is lying pure upon the hills and see the Glen again at the touch of a fairy wand. And amid the drudgery the beautiful and tender thoughts of one of America's truest poets will visit my heart.

Believe me, with every sentiment of admiration and regard,

Yours faithfully,

JOHN WATSON.

CHAPTER XX

A PATRIOTIC CIVILIAN

AS to patriotism the poet felt "the glory and might of his country throbbing in every pulsation of his heart." He was an ardent lover of his country and a firm believer in its future. Few things gave him more pleasure than to participate in some patriotic exercises, but in so doing he never sought a prominent place. Let the statesmen, the orators and the warriors sit in the front row. He, as he phrased it at the Army of the Tennessee Banquet, was "an humble citizen, a mere civilian," content to contribute his mite in a modest manner. Nevertheless, if applause is a measure of merit, it turned out many times that his performance was the most conspicuous feature on the program.

His patriotic fervor originated in the dark days of his country's progress, days now rich in memory, as he was fond of saying; days when no one knew whether the Union would survive, the "days when the Old Band swept musically to the front," he said, "and I read *A Man without a Country.*"

"I learned my lesson between the fall of Sumter and the fall of Richmond," he continued. "My school of instruction was a series of happenings in my native town." Quaintly he undervalued the place—

"A little old town in the days long done
Of Eighteen Hundred and Sixty-One,
In the April lull of a storm that burst—
Launched on the flag at Sumter first:
A little old town of the days long done,
When the shoe-shop, tavern, and store were one;
And the one 'town hall' was the ware-room, where
The Band-Boys met and the dances were:
A little old town where the stranger found
Little of welcome waiting round—
Especially were his business known
As confined to himself alone."

"Our little town, like every other village and every metropolis throughout the country at that time," he wrote in his sketch, "Mary Alice Smith," "was, to the children at least, a scene of continuous holiday and carnival. The nation's heart was palpitating with the feverish pulse of war, and already the still half-frozen clods of the common highway were beaten into frosty dust by the tread of marshalled men, and the shrill shriek of the fife, and the hoarse boom and jar and rattling patter of the drums stirred every breast with something of that rapturous insanity of which true patriots and heroes are made."

In those days he learned and listened to wondrous words, he said, that had the sound of wind and the voice of waters—and sometimes, boy though he was, he repeated these wondrous words. Early residents of Greenfield recall a recruiting day when, in response to requests, he mounted a goods box in the street and recited "Sheridan's Ride." "While listening," said a survivor of that time, "we heard the echoes of angry guns far away, and when the youth had finished, men fell over each other to enlist for the war."

The youth was not a soldier, but he could chant the praises of valor, and, when older, could sing of the soldier in "The Name of Old Glory," and eloquently recite it, as he did at the dedication of monuments on the Shiloh battle-field and elsewhere. Once in his famous days, a weekly paper printed one of his martial poems. "The poem shows," wrote the editor in his comment, "that the poet in the hour of his country's need, would shoulder the musket and march to the front." "The editor did not know," added Riley, "that at the first shot of a picket the poet would run like a reindeer."

In the closing days of the war, scarcely had the fires of one demonstration died out in Greenfield when they were kindled for another. One Saturday afternoon in April there was a Grand Mass Meeting—Richmond had fallen—ending at night with bonfires in the street and a "monster conflagration" on the common, and "a Grand Hop by our patriotic ladies" in anticipation of the boys' return from the battle-plains of the South. Memories of the "conflagration" Riley afterward incorporated in an unpublished story. To the end of his career he could ever hear the swelling chorus of the village bells—and the men hurrying through the streets, their long black shadows chasing them toward the fire—how the wind whooped and moaned and stroked and caressed with its wavy hand, the long yellow tresses of flame—and how it lashed them into mad furious bursts of passion that like distorted serpents sullenly died away in trailing columns of smoke.

Swiftly following the surrender of Richmond came the news from Appomattox Court House. "The trans-

port in Greenfield the morning after Lee's surrender," said Riley, "touched the borders of lawlessness." With boyish glee he itemized "ingredients of the confusion"—cider barrels brought from cellars and opened on the sidewalks—a little whisky mixed with the cider—dippers for each barrel—old wagons and drays full of men who were full of cider, drawn to and fro through the street—hats riddled with bullets when thrown in the air—young women lifted to tables and goods boxes to sing "Tramp, Tramp, the Boys Are Marching"—the prankish crowd catching the impromptu spirit of the carnival, wildly screaming and leaping and singing in chorus—such was the scene the poet remembered. In the absence of order, there was considerable inconvenience occasioned by revelers loading firearms and shooting paper wads into the populace. Referring to a citizen thus disabled, Riley said, "We picked war news out of his leg for a week."

Always in military as well as civic matters the poet espoused the cause of the rank and file. Their faith, fortitude, and all-absorbing love of country,—what were a nation without them? "Great soldiery, great oratory," he once remarked, referring to the eloquence of Robert Ingersoll at Indianapolis in 1876; "it was the Grand Army men around the speaker, wildly waving their hats in the rain, that made the oration possible."

Always the soldier was an inspiring presence. It mattered not that some were listed among the missing and the dead. Wherever there was a reunion of veterans, the absent were there. Through a period of forty years he was again and again privileged to

see the "great remnant" of Indiana's 250,000 soldier boys march around Monument Place, Indianapolis, in commemoration of some heroic event. Always it seemed to Riley that shoulder-to-shoulder with those who marched were the spirits of those "whose dust we have covered with flowers," and in his latter years, the invisible army trooping through the streets vastly outnumbered the visible. Of the invisible army he sang in "Soldiers Here To-Day"—

"Soldiers and saviors of the homes we love;
Heroes and patriots who marched away,
And who marched back, and who marched on above—
All—all are here to-day!

"Here—by the stars that bloom in fields of blue,
And by the bird above with shielding wings;
And by the flag that floats out over you,
With silken beckonings—

"In fancy all are here. The night is o'er,
And through dissolving mists the morning gleams;
And clustered round their hearths we see once more
The heroes of our dreams.

"A bloom of happiness in every cheek—
A thrill of tingling joy in every vein—
In every soul a rapture they will seek
In Heaven, and find again!"

On many historic occasions in his elderly days, the poet read original poems—tributes to presidents and the commanders of armies, such as "The Home Voyage" at the unveiling of the Henry W. Lawton statue in Indianapolis, and "William McKinley" at the dedication of the McKinley Memorial at Canton, Ohio. On each occasion President Roosevelt was the orator of

the day, both president and poet spoke to immense throngs, and both were greeted with mighty cheers. Great as these and like occasions were, the poems composed for them did not measure up to the heights of the poet's genius when his heart was on fire and the plain soldier was his theme.

Sympathizing with the man in the ranks, it was quite fitting that the poet should respond to the toast, "The Common Patriot," at the banquet of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee, in Chicago, Thursday night, October 8, 1891—all in all, the most significant effort of his life, on a patriotic program.

For two days the city had been a living panorama of patriotic fervor. Wednesday, the poet's birthday, one of the most imposing pageants ever seen in the West had passed through the city's streets. In the afternoon, one hundred thousand people had witnessed in Lincoln Park the unveiling of the heroic statue of General Grant, one of the largest equestrian castings ever made in America. "Like a Giant Hero in the Sky," the poet remarked after the unveiling, "it stands with face toward the morning."

The banquet, in the "spacious dining hall" of the Palmer House, was the grand finale to the two-days' celebration, "the largest course-dinner," it was said, "ever given in Chicago." The feast of eloquence rivaled that in the never-to-be-forgotten banquet given to the "Old Commander" in the same city, on his return from his trip around the world. The very titles of the toasts added luster to the occasion:

"General Ulysses S. Grant"_____Horace Porter
"Let Us Have Peace"_____Henry Watterson

"The Press in the War for the Union"--Joseph Medill
"The Common Patriot" ------James Whitcomb Riley
"The Late General Sherman"-----Augustus Jacobson

"While the common patriot never invited, seems never to expect, and certainly does not require the tribute such as may be paid him at the banquet-board," Riley said in part, "it is all the more an honor, as I take it, when, by general consent of the Army of the Tennessee, a mere civilian is permitted to say something of him. The common patriot!—he seems so accessible. A hero he is, indeed, forever within reach and grasp and hand-shake of us all; in constant touch and hail, all unremoved from us by the elevated office or insulated service jealously barring him from us with guns and fortress walls. The common patriot, thank Heaven, is left to roam at large up and down the land he glorifies by his presence. Everybody knows him familiarly and affectionately by his first name or his last. As there is a type of actor so excellent and perfect in his art that we cease entirely to regard his great gift critically or justly measure and appreciate his rare possession as anything but the most natural quality in the world, likewise we have this type of patriot, so naturally fitted to the part, and withal so natively endowed and capable and satisfactory in his simple presentation of the character, that we are apt to overlook his very highest claims to our prolonged applause and our enduring gratitude.

"This is the common patriot, not the exalted chieftain charging to the front of battle with his glittering sword waving onward to the very cannon's mouth, but the patriot of the advancing line, with shattered right arm limp and useless at his side, the old flag caught and lifted with his left, and the terrible 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' on his lips. (Applause.)

"The common patriot! There are regiments of them—battalions and brigades—vast, earth-shaking armies! It was the common patriot who 'somewhat

grimly smiled' a smile 400,000 strong! He it was, in rallying legions with the flag overhead, who received his marching orders 'to the sea.' Nor is it unlikely that the common patriot, aside from his God-given tendencies, has often found his model in such of his great generals as Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, and that illustrious line of men whose genius forced them on to lead, even as at the nation's head the common patriot found the type-perfect in the character of the immortal Lincoln. (Applause.)

"Wherever we may find this homely type repeated, inevitably we will find a man of commonplace origin. He was begotten of the love of home and the shriek, and thump, and rattle of a sheepskin band. In the political processions of his earliest youth the old flag, glittering and fluttering in the sunshine and the wind, seemed always to be laughing, as though very much tickled over something it had promised on its honor not to tell. (Such, the poet recalled, was his own vision of it the morning after Lee's surrender.) Its stars laughed, and its stripes laughed. Its red, white, and blue caught the patriot's own breath as he ran from his mother's arms and shouted after it. Instinctively he loved it at first sight, even as his forefathers had before him, and as his children will after him. Therefore is it that he was raised to be an element of the country's life and perpetuity as natural as the life principle of the republic."

After prefacing the lines with an old farm scene, the poet closed his tribute with "Decoration Day on the Place," a poem revamped for the banquet, but originally written and attributed to the common patriot, "Benjamin F. Johnson of Boone." The central thought in the poem—every day on earth is the soldier's decoration day—was received with loud acclaim. The veterans of the Tennessee Army glimpsed

through tears the patriot's resting place in the orchard—

"And the flag he died for, smiling and rippling in the breeze
Above his grave, and over that, the robin in the trees."

The speech, with poem, required a half-hour for delivery. When the poet had finished, so press reports testify, "the assembly rose as one man and waved their napkins until the vast space appeared like a troubled sea with waving linen." The hurricane of applause was the test of the poet's power, "the *only* test," as Mark Twain said of Ingersoll's speech at the Grant banquet in the same hall; "people may shout, clap their hands, stamp and wave their napkins, but none but the master can make them *get up on their feet.*"

"The really great hit of the evening," said the Chicago *Inter Ocean,* editorially, "was James Whitcomb Riley's tribute to the men who did the actual fighting. There was not a commonplace sentence spoken by him, and the poem with which he closed deserves a place in the little classics of American literature."

Five minutes the demonstration lasted. "When and where," guests asked one another, "had there been anything like that in the history of men of letters?" The storm of applause continuing, the poet was compelled again and again to bow his acknowledgment, and at last, in sheer desperation, to recite his popular poem, "The Old Man and Jim."

Commenting years after on the unusual brilliancy of the banquet, Riley vigorously protested against the

verdict of the guests and the press. "They permitted their love and the applause to bias their judgment," said he. "The hit of the evening was *not* made by the Hoosier Poet. That honor belonged to Henry Watterson. 'You have heard,' said Watterson in his opening remarks, 'that the war is over. I am glad of it. Roses smell sweeter than gunpowder.' Nothing finer than that," added Riley, "has been said since Demosthenes. In saying what he did of Grant at work on his *Memoirs,* after he had shouldered his gun and fought for the stars and bars, Watterson may justly be termed the Flower of Southern Chivalry."

Said Watterson in closing: "Grant was the embodiment of simplicity, integrity and courage; every inch a general, a soldier and a man, but in the circumstances of his last illness, a figure of heroic proportions for the contemplation of the ages. I recall nothing in history so sublime as the spectable of that brave spirit, broken in fortune and in health, with the dread hand of the dark angel clutched about his throat, struggling with every breath to hold the clumsy, unfamiliar weapon with which he sought to wrest from the jaws of death a little something for the support of wife and children when he was gone. If he had done nothing else, that would have made his exit from the world an immortal epic!"

"When Grant did that," said Riley, "he was not the commander of armies. He was a common patriot leaving an example for civilians to emulate."

Common patriotism, the significance of neighbor and neighborhood, was the poet's theme when he responded to the toast, "Our Guest," at the reception to

ex-President Harrison, given by the Indianapolis Commercial Club in April, 1897:

"The citizen—the patriot—the soldier—the chieftain in the van of battle victory—the chieftain still in civil conquest—all have been enumerated and extolled by our universal nation—so paternally proud of such a son. But may there not be fittingly offered—in however brief a way—some comment out of this particular community, in the grateful midst of which is builded the home of this man—our friend and neighbor. There—that sounds exactly right. Neighbor. Our neighbor.

"Like the rare list of strong yet lovely words that, of their own pronunciation seem to define themselves —such as father, mother, home, country, flag—the simple, wholesome name of neighbor affects us pleasantly and always as though we had most accurately known its fullest meaning from its first utterance in our childish ears. To our neighbor, thus, in all neighborly spirit, we address ourselves to-night—here in his chosen State and city, where of his own deserving in young manhood he won welcome, fixed his dwelling and cheerily took his place and chance in the common rank and file of his onward-moving fellow citizens.

"The details of the trials of that earlier time and scene the young aspirant of to-day, of course, knows little of, nor does that history, as fitfully chronicled by reminiscent contributors to the home papers evoke its just measure of serious consideration. Only the sturdy and heroic participants themselves can realize the import of that earlier history—only the comrades of that epoch and environment—the old friends—the old neighbors. To them the simple glories of that primitive past yet exceed all its trials and ordeals, and draw them into closer comradeship to-day. To them that past is sacred, and as they meet, strike hands and

fall into hearty discussion of the bygone years, it is always with warmth of interest.

"In the cheeriest, mirthful greeting, there is a minor note; in the merriest twinkle of the eye, a certain shadowy, tender, yet insistent threat of rain. It is the fitting reverence remembrance pays to the youth-time of that friendship now grown to such ripe and sound maturity. So steadfastly on until this hour has it fared with our old friend and neighbor. Loyally, with the lapse of years and the advent of newer worthy claimants on that friendly interest, he has ever extended it willingly, generously and helpfully. He has not forgotten his own youth—its struggles and its needs—and so his unerring sympathy has inspired in the earnest young man and student a firmer faith in all his brave resolves, a surer promise and fulfillment of his hopes and his ambitions. This most fortunate type of the young man is known here and abroad; he may be found to-day, in the flush of the attainments of his hopes in life, still happily in this pleasant neighborhood, or he may be found distinguishing himself in fields and scenes remote, but wherever found he is ever blessing his stars that it was in this neighborhood he was first given his true bearings and directions upon his successful career and that a true friend and neighbor first recognized his worth, and reached to him the help of a firm hand, together with the cheer and Godspeed that was inspiration.

"This was, and is, the beneficent and all-pervading spirit of our guest to-night—our fellow citizen—the always simple, unassuming and unselfish member of a simple community so signally favored as to do him honor long prior to that universal homage so justly won when he

> 'Became on Fortune's crowning slope
> The pillar of a people's hope,
> The center of a world's desire.'"

When the day came for the dedication of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument at Indianapolis, May 15, 1902, the poet came forward with the dedicatory poem, "The Soldier"—still, in heart and voice, the votary of the common patriot—

"The Soldier!—Why, the very utterance
Is music—as of rallying bugles, blent
With blur of drums and cymbals and the chants
Of battle-hymns that shake the continent."

The newspapers christened it "Indiana's greatest day"—a day sacred to the memory of the Silent Victors, made impressive by a sunny blue sky, the historic parade of battle flags, and the presence of two hundred thousand people massed in the Monument Circle and the streets approaching it.

As usual on such occasions, the approach of speakers and distinguished officials to the platform was greeted with outbursts of applause. "Particularly cordial," said the press report, "was the reception accorded the Hoosier Poet, when his familiar form was seen coming down the north steps of the Monument to the speakers' stand."

After the parade, Governor Winfield T. Durbin accepted the Monument for the state. General Lew Wallace presided, and in their order on the program introduced former Secretary of State, John W. Foster, as the orator of the day, and James Whitcomb Riley as the poet of the day.

Advancing to the front of the stand Riley first saluted his fellow litterateur and friend, General Wallace. Then turning to the sea of humanity before him

he waved his hand for silence—and silence came, "a hush over the multitude while he read the poem that was in itself a tribute to the singer and the song." When he had concluded, a storm of applause proved once more that there was something in the poet's voice that delighted the hearts of men.

"It is to me a pleasure and a privilege to present a simple tribute to the soldiers," was the poet's first word to the multitude. It *was* a tribute—but the tribute with eloquence of genius in it was "A Monument for the Soldiers," a poem first presented to the public in a weekly paper nearly twenty years before—written in the author's joyous, bounding days, before he was excessively concerned about the appearance of his poems in book form, when, as a knowing critic said, "he did not have to be careful of the collocation and cadence of words, when the inherent lilt and music of his lines took everybody captive":

"A Monument for the Soldiers!
And what will ye build it of?
Can ye build it of marble, or brass, or bronze,
Outlasting the Soldiers' love?
Can ye glorify it with legends
As grand as their blood hath writ
From the inmost shrine of this land of thine
To the outermost verge of it?

"And the answer came: We would build it
Out of our hopes made sure,
And out of our prayers and tears,
And out of our faith secure:
We would build it out of the great white truths
Their death hath sanctified,
And the sculptured forms of the men in arms,
And their faces ere they died.

"A monument for the soldiers!
Built of a people's love,
And blazoned and decked and panoplied
With the hearts ye build it of!
And see that ye build it stately,
In pillar and niche and gate,
And high in pose as the souls of those
It would commemorate!"

While the tattered emblems of heroic days, the battle flags, were borne past the reviewing stand, Riley stood as one enchanted by some beatific vision. Those near him, the aged widow of Governor Oliver P. Morton for one, observed the light in his countenance. An "invisible host" was marching by—and Riley saw it. Commenting afterward, he explained that there had flashed on his mind a new apprehension of that felicitous phrase in Ingersoll's "Vision of War"—the serenity of death. (*"Earth may run red with other wars—they are at peace. In the midst of battle, in the roar of conflict, they found the serenity of death."*)

A quarter of a century before, this radiant orator had spoken these words from a platform on the same plaza, a few steps only from where the poet was standing. "On that day of other days," said Riley, "the clouds wept—and well they might, since men wept tears of joy as well as grief, for if ever language of man was accented by an angel, it was that day. My day was not a day of weeping. The woes of the war were far away. I gazed into a *serene* sky, a sky of inobscurity, a heaven of light and life and love—and that was the *serenity*, the inobscurity of death. Death was not a mystery—death was not the Dread Angel—death was not darkness, not night."

Riley was ever unshaken in his belief in the immortality of trees and flowers and friends. No matter how all is confused in our near-sighted eyes, there is a Paradise—there is life eternal. Though our companions, our children, go mysteriously from us, they are still faring on in the Beyond, was his faith. Had not Longfellow assured us that they were going to school where they no longer need our poor instruction? "Alone at night," Riley attested, "I have heard music so sweet, so superior to all earthly harmonies, that it seems a profanation to mention it,—such music as Ole Bull has been hearing since he went to Paradise. Who could look upon him now, radiant, eloquent with fancy and understanding? One of his pleasures is to stroll back here to give me and other musicians glimpses of his rapture."

Thus Riley was charmed with *The Blue Bird,* the Belgian poet's story of the little brother and sister roaming through the fairy world in search of happiness, and finding it at last in their own hearts at home. Particularly he sanctioned the suggestion that our burial grounds are fairy gardens where birds sing and flowers bloom—that our soldiers, our friends, though departed, are still living.

"Where are the dead?" the little sister asked—humanity asks.

"There are no dead," the brother answered—and that, Riley was assured, is the truth for all ages—the only answer—"*There are no dead.*"

CHAPTER XXI

LAST DAYS ON THE PLATFORM

"THE American stage lost a great actor when Riley refused to take the profession seriously as a life work," remarked Sir Henry Irving, after hearing the poet in the New York Authors' Readings.

"Riley was a close observer from childhood," said his Greenfield chum, John Davis. "Nothing ever escaped him. He would wander around with us boys over there (pointing to the willows on the banks of Brandywine) and perhaps a stranger would come along. Soon as he had passed Riley would mimic him. It was natural for the poet to take his part in a play. He was a great actor."

"He was a born actor," said his old Schoolmaster. "I remember his acting in a play called *The Child of Waterloo,* in which he took the character of Troubled Tom. He was supposed to be the son of a blacksmith left on the battle-field. He made the character so funny, made so much out of it, that it became the star part in the play."

"Henry, you and I have been studying all these years how to act, but here is a young man out of the West, who knows all we know by nature," said the French actor, Coquelin to Irving, after hearing Riley at the Savage Club in London—an exaggeration, but proof, if proof were necessary, that the poet was

extraordinarily gifted as an actor. Few men ever succeeded more superbly in entrancing an audience, in stealing away its faculties and leading it captive to his will. "Never any other man," wrote Booth Tarkington, "stood night after night on stage or platform to receive such solid roars of applause for the 'reading' of poems—and for himself. He did not 'read' his poems; he did not 'recite' them, either; he took his whole body into his hands, as it were, and by his wizard mastery of suggestion left no James Whitcomb Riley at all upon the stage; instead, the audiences saw and heard whatever the incomparable comedian wished them to see and hear."

How did he do it? No one can tell, any more than one can explain why "the trumpet vine blooms." Riley as the Signal Man in *Under the Gaslight*, or as Adam Brock in the historical drama, *Charles XII*, or impersonating the old-timer in "Griggsby's Station," or the elf child in "Little Orphant Annie"—what was the secret of his power? His audience could not explain it. Like the French he possessed the gift of managing minds by his accent and the caress of his speech, but when that is said, there was mystery still about it.

Nor could the poet explain, and he seldom attempted it. He sometimes attributed it to the character of his selections. "A long experience," said he, "has taught me not to be ambitious to instruct anybody from the footlights. An audience does not want that, but it does want to be cheerfully entertained. It never tires of simple, wholesome, happy themes. Give it what it desires—here is the secret, if there is any secret in it. Make things as entertaining to the

audience as to yourself. An audience is cosmopolitan in character, a neighborly gathering, all on a level. The rich are there, and they are interested in the poor, since they came originally from the ranks of those who walk by the wayside. They know as I know that the crude man is generally moral, for Nature has just let go his hand. She's just been leading him through the dead leaves and the daisies. When I deal with such a man in my readings, I give him credit for every virtue; but what he does and the way he does it is *his* way, not mine. It is my office to interpret him.

"I talk of the dear old times," Riley continued, "when there were no social distinctions, of pioneer homes and towns, where there was a warm welcome for all, just as if all were blood brothers as Kipling says. I muse or romp happily amid the scenes of my childhood and the paradise is promptly recognized and appreciated by my audience. The difficult thing, the delicate office, is to know what to choose, and when to stop." The poet did not say it, but his program truly answered both questions.

But the secret of his success in his reading was not so much the concern of the people. What they wanted was more of it, and in spite of Riley's repeated resolve to retire from the platform, he continued to please the public in that way, the public in turn rewarding him with ovations and a big bank-account. But never again did he prolong the engagements. Once an offer of five hundred dollars a night for fifty nights was declined. Three or four nights a week for four or five weeks was the rule, then perhaps a rest for a year, and sometimes two or three years, the engagements being mostly confined to large cities and

university centers. "My last swing around the track," was his final word; "I have pulled the check string; never again for my money or the gate money" —and that was the end of platforming for the Hoosier Poet.

In 1894 Riley's father had died and the poet had purchased and restored the homestead at Greenfield, which the father had lost by speculation soon after the Civil War. From the day of its restoration the homestead became a shrine, and more and more the poet an idol. Although he had climbed far, he had not been lost to the view of old-time friends and neighbors. Since the publication of *Old-Fashioned Roses,* he had been widely read on both sides of the Atlantic, and since his New York appearance the demand for him on the platform had been unceasing. Greenfield desired to contribute its mite to the wide wave of approval.

To face the men and women he had known always was a test of the poet's courage, and from time to time invitations had been declined. But in January, 1896, having an opportunity to donate the total receipts from his reading to a church, and the further understanding that his old Schoolmaster was to assist him in the program, he yielded and one Tuesday evening stepped from the Pan-Handle Accommodation to find "a reception," he said, "on a scale worthy the return of a prodigal son." There was no reception committee except a voluntary one comprising the inhabitants. The platform was a mass of people, and back of the station the crowd extended far into the muddy street. As he stepped from the coach to the platform he was greeted by strains from the Old Band,

the organization that had been made famous by his verse—the same old band, though some of its members were missing, that in the war days had played "Lily Dale" and "Hazel Dell," music which other crowds in distant towns had heard many times since, in the poem.

The entertainment was in the old Masonic Hall, whose walls echoed incidents of the poet's school-days —the schoolroom, which he had helped to equip with footlights, scenery and other theatrical paraphernalia, and in which he had been locally conspicuous as an actor. An hour before his appearance the crowd filled the standing room space, the wings of the stage, the doorways and the stairway leading up from the street. Never before in Greenfield had there been such enthusiasm over the return of a citizen.

After some musical numbers, the poet stepped to the footlights. Addressing the audience as old-time friends he said: "After an absence of some length and wanderings that have been devious, I am deeply touched by this cordial welcome to the place of my birth. It will always be a dear old home to me because it contains the best, the kindest and most forbearing friends that I have ever known or am likely to know. I am moved also this evening by finding myself in the presence of my old friend and master, Captain Harris. How to thank you and him, as I thank my blessed stars, reminds me of an anecdote, as Mr. Lincoln used to say."

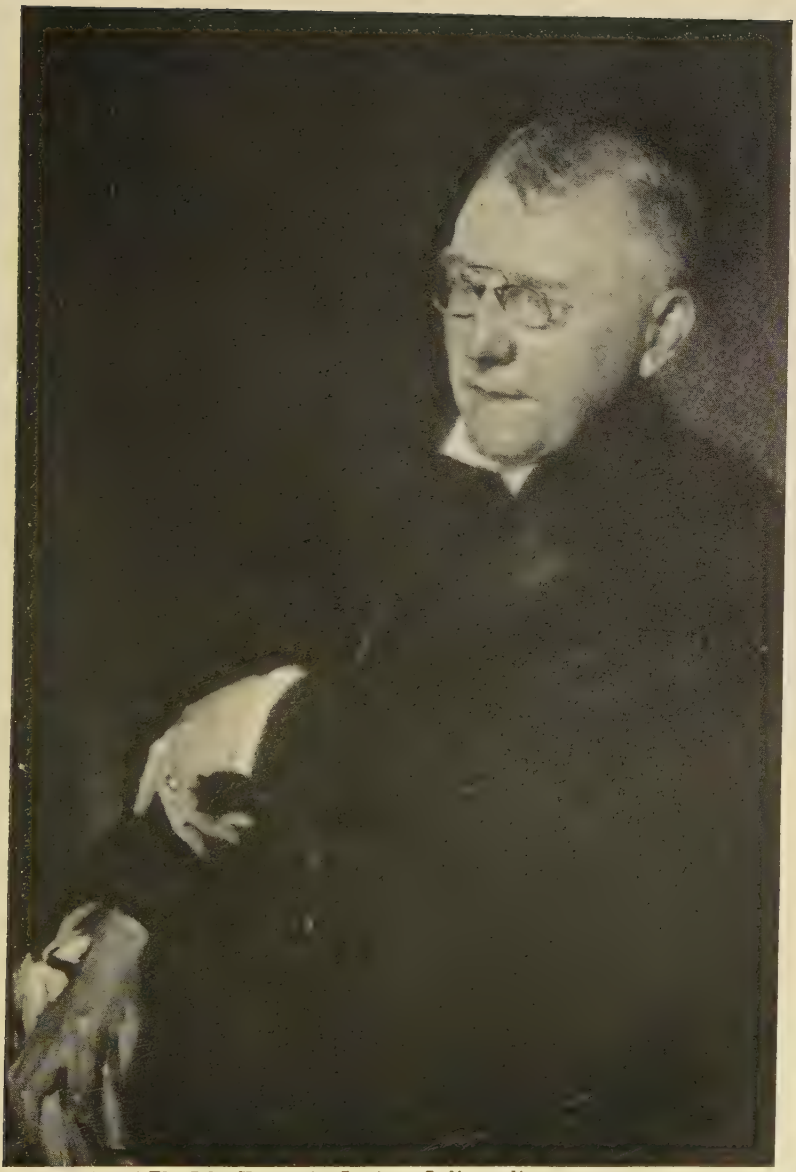
Here the poet told of a miner, an old forty-niner, who returned to his native town in the condition of poverty that he was when he left it. He had no money, but he had had plenty of experience. He had

been offered a quarter-section of fine California land, with fruit trees, and springs, and a vein of gold running through it—all this for a pair of boots, and he had not bought it because he did not have the boots. "So it is with my thanks," continued the poet. "I do not have them, at least I have not language in which to express them. I have in mind a poem which found its fundamental principles in this town. Many of you will recall our old band—the old Saxhorn Band. I want you to fancy the speaker is an old resident of Greenfield, who has moved away, and after many years has returned."

Then, with an artless look at the orchestra, where sat the few surviving members of the old organization, he recited the poem with the well-known refrain —"I want to hear the old band play." At its conclusion the applause was so prolonged that a citizen arose in the audience and asked for silence, reminding the people that they were in an old building, and should the applause be too noisy the floor might collapse.

Riley made no attempt to leave the stage, bowing his acknowledgments. "There is reminiscence for us all," he said when silence had been restored, "in an old town and country sketch, which attempts to picture two barefoot boys, who had an old aunt in the country whom they used to visit—two brothers, one, in his declining years, writing the other, who had moved to the Far West—

"Wasn't it pleasant, O brother mine,
In those old days of the lost sunshine
Of youth—when the Saturday's chores were through,



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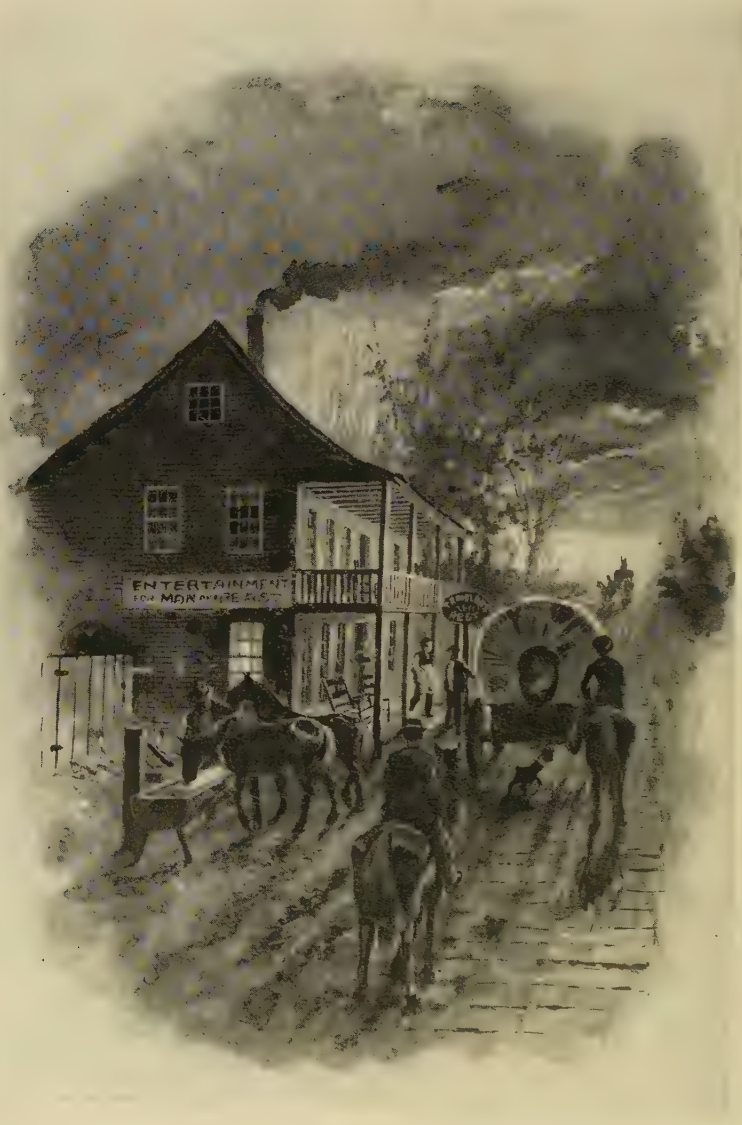
FROM A PORTRAIT OF THE POET BY JOHN S. SARGENT



Travelers' Rest, the Tavern on the Old National Road,
Philadelphia, Indiana—1850—a Memory

And the 'Sunday's wood' in the kitchen, too,
And we went visiting, 'me and you,'
Out to Old Aunt Mary's?"

Then came "The Lily-Bud," which, perfect as it was, his audience declared was not a whit superior to his rendition of it in the old town twenty years before. Although the poem was not his own, he had so "Riley-ized" it that it seemed his own.

And so followed other familiar selections, among them "An Old Sweetheart of Mine," which he read with such feeling that the "Golden Girl, a bright vision to us all," said one of his hearers, "seemed to step out on the stage and lean over his shoulder to kiss him on the sly for the sentiment."

In October, 1896, Riley again answered the call from the Rocky Mountains, appearing in Pueblo, Greeley, Colorado Springs and Denver. But the summit of interest for the poet in that direction was Myron Reed, who, living in Denver, had appealed annually to his friend for a visit, since their voyage together to England. "From our youth," said Riley, "we were voyagers on the deep, the ocean of life (which probably accounts for my chimerical fancies since seamen are prone to be superstitious). We kept our lamp blazing in the binnacle. We felt the sea-mist on our brows and the surging waters against the prow. There was something in Reed's presence that gave me strength. He was familiar with flinty up-hill ways, and the dangers of the deep, and the cries of drowning men. He was always the good Samaritan to those whose lot in life had not been happily cast. He had a genius for sympathy. He kept an eye out

for sea-tossed pilgrims. Thus his love in the early days for me."

"Where is your trunk?" asked Reed when Riley reached the mountains.

"In Lockerbie Street," was the answer. "Nine times out of ten, when I travel with a trunk, the thing is lost. Recently, I discovered that my friends who have 'gone beyond the line' are having fun with me at my expense. Since crossing the divide Nye has been steering me into wrong trains and smiling about it. So I burden myself no more with heavy baggage. If I travel with a trunk I am haunted with the fear that it will be lost. I go about the country with a grip, and I keep a tenacious hold on it all day, but I never feel quite safe about it at night. If there is ever a horrible railway accident and among the debris is discovered a valise with an arm attached to it, they may bury it without further identification as the fragments of the Hoosier Poet."

Three thousand people enjoyed and cheered the poet in Colorado Springs, and Reed introduced him to an audience equally large in Denver. "It was my pleasure," said Reed, "to introduce the speaker of the evening to his first Indianapolis audience. He came from a small Indiana town, then he came from Indiana, then he came from the United States, and then he was known on both sides of the Atlantic. If he has more friends elsewhere than here it is because the city elsewhere is larger than Denver."

History affords few examples of a love more abiding than that of Reed for Riley. It was akin to Charles Sumner's devotion to Longfellow. Eminently

fitting it was that Reed should occupy a chair at the edge of the platform while the poet rendered his program. Friends marked the glow of satisfaction on his face. As if he said, This is the crowning moment —now let thy servant depart in peace.

Within two short years the departure came. In his last moments, the nurse observed that Reed was repeating a name. There seemed a thread of fine recollection in it. Leaning nearer to hear, she discovered that he was feebly whispering "Riley." Thus the preacher and soldier, master of men and lover of mankind, passed through the gates to the Beyond, with the name of his friend on quivering lips.

In November, 1897, the poet devoted two weeks to Kansas City, Topeka, Lincoln, Omaha and Des Moines. "Seven nights," he remarked after the reading in the last city, "and every night an ovation. It was not thus with the Hoosier Poet in days gone by."

There is no explaining Riley, said William Reedy in the St. Louis *Mirror,* February, 1898. The only thing to do is to surrender to him. St. Louis surrendered. She crowded a large theater and crowned the success of the evening with a graceful introduction of the poet by the governor of the state.

In April of the same year Riley made a little journey into his "southern neighborhood"—Memphis, Nashville, Atlanta and other cities of Dixie fame. In October, beginning in Cincinnati, he continued the series of ovations north to the Lakes, and eastward to Boston. Once more he became the center of affection and attention in a brilliant, representative gathering in Tremont Temple. The reading was under the

auspices of the Woman's Club House Corporation, and the poet was happily assisted in his program by local musicians, as he had been in other cities.

When Julia Ward Howe, leaning on the arm of the poet, slowly mounted the platform, there was an outburst of applause that had no precedent in Boston or elsewhere. The audience realized that it was viewing a picture which no assembly was likely to behold again. "I find myself charged with an introduction," said Mrs. Howe, taking Riley by the hand and leading him to the front of the stage, "a duty which is as welcome as it is responsible. The program this evening is fittingly one of music and poetry, and may it be that this house will be a temple of the best harmony."

The poet as he stood beside the venerable woman was positively pale. Soon however he overcame his nervousness, his cheeks were flushed, and poet and audience were one with each other. In response to the introduction he said: "In the incident of ordinary travel, it is a novel experience and delight for a Westerner to visit this historic spot—indeed his most matter-of-fact coming into this storied city is so memorable an event as to touch his American spirit with a still newer sense of national pride and reverence and obligation. Judge, then, the bewildered emotional state of the present visitor, brought face to face with so distinctive a people and presented for their gracious tolerance by a citizen so distinguished as to have uttered an inspired song for our Republic that shall not die while patriot hearts are fired with patriot love." (Prolonged applause.)

Then the poet "with a sort of provincial drawl," launched into his usual program. Before leaving

Boston, while conversing with Mrs. Howe, Riley expressed his debt to her for his poem, "The Peace-Hymn of the Republic," which he had read at the 29th G. A. R. Encampment at Louisville, Kentucky,—how he, while writing it, had trusted to the inspiration of another, the author of "The Battle-Hymn of the Republic." "My effort was a faint echo," he said to Mrs. Howe, who promptly silenced him by praising a sentiment in his own poem—

"We felt our Pilot's presence with His hand upon the storm,
As we went sailing on."

"With that Pilot," added Mrs. Howe, "we walked the troubled waters. Our Ship of State groped through the smoke of war to the day of *your* hymn—the day of peace."

In March, 1899, Riley answered calls from Pittsburgh, Princeton University, Philadelphia and other points in that region. His audience in Washington was in the highest degree representative, consisting of senators, representatives, cabinet officers, and many of the most prominent social leaders of the Capital. It was a spontaneous, heartfelt compliment, with which a city sometimes delights to honor its chosen idol. "The audience which greeted the poet at the Grand Opera House," said the Washington *Post*, "was a tribute to genius. The spacious auditorium was taxed to its utmost capacity. On a night when the counter-attractions were the most alluring of the whole season in this city, with what are probably the greatest drawing cards of the dramatic world opposed

to him, he received an ovation which almost constitutes an epoch in his career. Recalled time after time, during the progress of the reading, his triumph received its crowning demonstration when, after his concluding number, the audience refused to leave the hall, and compelled him by perfect thunders of applause to appear again."

In the larger cities, where the demand for seats was very great, the poet sometimes gave two evenings to the public. This he did in Chicago in October, 1900. His quaint introductions to the recitations were the same here as elsewhere, the program each evening having four general divisions, suggesting the character of his recitations.

TUESDAY EVENING

1. Annals of the Poor.
2. Hoosier Verse.
3. Character Sketches.
4. Rhymes of Childhood.

"I have to offer this evening," the poet said, introducing his program, "some homely specimens, with your kindly tolerance, of the dialect that is peculiar to our Western American country, and these specimens, I may say, are intended to be conscientious studies of the people and their peculiar feelings and characteristics, as well as of their home language, which is their native tongue. I do not know how better to begin, because I want to gain your favor by relieving you of any possible fear that I am going to administer a lecture, and therefore I will at once offer you a character sketch of an old country farmer, seventy years of age, the pioneer American type, upon whose homestead are found possibly not more than a half dozen books, each carefully selected, each an ever-present inspiration. In this connection we must remember

that the best of all the works of this meagre library is The Book of Books; following that, *The Prince of the House of David,* and for history—not the history of an elevated countryman but the history of a true American like himself, *The History of Daniel Boone.* For romance, such as *Scottish Chiefs, Children of the Abbey, Pilgrim's Progress,* and one or more of the poets, numbering among them some of the collected hymns that are sung in the little country churches, over the lines of which the old man has painfully gone a syllable at a time, again and again, until he knows them all and loves them all. Then we must remember also that this splendid type of the old man goes hand in hand with the all-kind Mother Nature, lives in the green fields and near the still waters, where the opportunity for contemplation is near the heart of Nature. And, so we find the old man is after all equipped with an education, with wisdom and philosophy, at which, somehow or other we feel abashed when we try to apologize for it. I offer the old man just as nearly as he expressed it in his homely talk and philosophy, when the safety of the crops is being considered and when some of the discouragements of life are being manifested."

With this the poet recited "Thoughts fer the Discuraged Farmer," and then in their order, "The Lily Bud," "The Old Soldier's Story," "Out to Old Aunt Mary's," "An Old Sweetheart of Mine," "Down to the Capital," "The Object Lesson," and "Little Orphant Annie."

WEDNESDAY EVENING

1. Poems Here at Home.
2. Home Folks.
3. Life Studies
4. The Book of Joyous Children.

"I am glad to have the privilege of offering again some character studies of our native Western dialect,"

the poet began, "together with some of the characteristics of our native people, and in connection to answer favorably the request for two or three selections given last evening. I am not going to worry you with a long preamble or an expression of the intrinsic merit of the people at heart, but will at once begin this series of homely offerings. And first I present a couple of studies in contrast, and will ask you at this time to think of the speaker as an old man who has lived upon the farm all his life, has no other ambitions than to be on the old homestead. He is pleased and delighted with his family; his neighbors are always neighborly —a sort of family affection existing all round. With the inspiration of the divine—I may call it the divine —atmosphere of the season that is now about us, our old friend finds, instead of the melancholy so often associated with the sere and yellow leaf, much that is otherwise than gloomy. He speaks his homely tribute in this way":

Here the poet recited "When the Frost Is on the Punkin." The remaining selections for the evening were, "The Old Man and Jim," "The Tree Toad," "Out to Old Aunt Mary's," "Tradin' Joe," "The Object Lesson," "Dutch Frank," and "The Bear Story."

Chicago was a great triumph. Each evening before the curtain rang up, the old historic hall was filled to overflowing with representatives of all classes. From the first the audience was in sympathy with the poet. It knew his poems and anticipated his points; laughed with him, cried with him, and treated him throughout with such generous understanding that it seemed no idle compliment when, at the close of his reading the second night, he thanked the people for their kindness, and spoke of them as his "very dear friends."

If, as Barrie says in his *Tommy and Grizel,* (ran a press report), genius be the power to become a boy again, then the Hoosier Poet came within that class last night at Music Hall. The boy of six or seven was the character, and the poet became that boy. The lad in all his drollery, his mischief, his unconsciousness, stood and whined upon that stage. In one short evening the poet had been the small boy, the Hoosier farmer in divers rôles, the old soldier with one leg, and the educator with a theory and the peanut. No wonder Charles Dickens loved to read and act his characters, provided he received anything like the applause which last night welcomed James Whitcomb Riley.

The three years following 1900 was a rest period, with the exception of a few selections at the Authors' Readings for the Harrison Memorial Fund in Indianapolis, May 30 and 31, 1902, perhaps the most notable and brilliant literary and social event in the history of the city. The original intention was to have Riley appear only on the first night. At the last moment an appeal was made to him to take part in the second evening's program, as seen in the following (part of a letter addressed to him and signed by Vice President Fairbanks, the chairman, and the authors who were to read that night) :

With the utmost sincerity and good comradeship we beg you to appear with us on the last night of the Readings. We know that we are asking a sacrifice of you, but you must realize on your part that it is an opportunity that may never come to us again. In this we justify our selfishness.

With the heartiest good wishes and the confident hope that you will be one of us, we are

Faithfully yours,

CHARLES W. FAIRBANKS,
LEW WALLACE,
MEREDITH NICHOLSON,
GEORGE ADE,
EVALEEN STEIN,
CHARLES MAJOR,
GEORGE BARR MCCUTCHEON,
MARY HARTWELL CATHERWOOD.

After Riley had given the closing number the first evening, the applause was deafening, hundreds rising in the audience and waving their handkerchiefs in shouts of approval. "That's a tremendous noise to make over a little man," said Riley to friends standing in the wings of the stage. When silence was restored he came forward and gave "Little Orphant Annie."

At the close of the second evening, after he had responded with recitations to three encores, he stepped again to the footlights and said, "I will give one more sketch, and if that does not remove the audience, we will fumigate the hall."

The thunders of applause that greeted that sally bore striking resemblance to the clamor of a political convention.

Booth Tarkington who appeared on the program the second evening, has left on record a matchless tribute to the magic of the poet on the platform. He said, among other things, in *Collier's Weekly*, "He held a literally unmatched power over his audience for riotous laughter or for actual copious tears; and no one

who ever saw an exhibition of that power will forget it—or forget him. There he stood, alone upon the stage, a blond, shortish, whimsical man in evening clothes—a figure with 'a whole lot of style,' and a whole lot of his own style too! He offered a deferential prefatory sentence or so; then suddenly face and figure altered, seemed to merge completely into those of a person altogether different from the poet, and not Mr. Riley, but a Hoosier farm hand, perhaps, or a thin little girl stood before you, 'done to life.' Then the voice came, 'done to the life,' too—done to the last half-audible breath at the end of husky chuckle or wistful sigh. There was no visible effort on the part of the magician: the audience did not strain or worry for him as audiences so often do for those who 'entertain' them, because his craft lay not in contortion but in a glamouring suggestion that held spectators rapt and magnetized."

In the fall of 1903 the poet made the most successful tour of his career—financially as well as artistically successful, the door receipts in some cities totaling two thousand dollars—quite a contrast to the beginning of his platform success at Lewisville, Indiana, a quarter-century before, when the admission was ten cents, the total receipts nominal and his portion four dollars. The tour began at Frankfort, Indiana, with a tribute from a prince of orators, Congressman Charles B. Landis. "What a magnificent audience!" said he, introducing the poet. "What a temptation for a man in my business to deliver an address on the tariff, or the free and unlimited coinage of silver, or the gold standard. Frankfort should be proud that she is the initial point for a series of entertainments

which are certain to be memorable. I have always contended that Riley comes nearer being everybody's poet than anybody who has ever sung. How proud Indiana should be! What fame her sons and daughters have brought her in the literary field! Had she no other literary light than Riley, I contend that she would still be the envy of her sister states. His poem 'Old Glory' will be read and repeated as long as the stars shine on the banner. I remember that when my son was four years old, we read to him from Riley's verse, and the pathos of it brought tears to his childish eyes. That was the guileless tribute of childhood to genius. And now, when I present our friend to you, let all rise to their feet, and let every man and every woman, with handkerchief in hand wave him a welcome."

Instantly the audience rose and for the moment, poet and congressman saw through dewy eyes a sea of billowy white.

Quitting Frankfort, with Dickens' *Christmas Stories* and *The Oxford Book of English Verse* in his bag for reading between stations, the poet continued a circuit of Indiana cities, then northward to Saginaw, Michigan, returning through Ann Arbor, Detroit, Toledo and Dayton to Music Hall, Cincinnati, the interest and attendance increasing with each engagement. "Why should our city not be 'home' for Riley?" asked the Cincinnati *Post*. "He belongs to the world, and the world is proud of the kinship. He is one of the few men who can hang up their hats anywhere and find a welcome and hearty handshakes and cordial greetings. He is a missionary. The sunshine that

drips from his pen makes a million smiles. He teaches love and his school is open all the time."

The *Post* and the public did not know of the trials of traveling, of the poet's almost morbidly sensitive nature. They could not believe that the man who kept them vibrating like a pendulum "'twixt a smile and a tear," suffered every evening, before facing his audience, from nervous apprehension, known as "stage fright." But so he did. The poet the public knew—and the one it should have always uppermost in mind—was the singer who banished pain and sorrow, the lover of children and flowers and fairies. While he passed, the skies were sunny—

"In the suburb, in the town,
On the railway, in the square,
Came a beam of gladness down
Doubling daylight everywhere."

From Cincinnati the tour swung eastward to Pittsburgh, that the poet might grasp the hand of the rich-hearted Ras Wilson. "James Whitcomb Riley," wrote Wilson in the Pittsburg *Gazette* after the poet's visit, "has been before the public personally ever since his poems became known, and there are but few nooks and corners in this country that he has not visited on invitation given by the people, and to all of which he has a standing invitation to come again, and come often, and stay as long as he can." From Pittsburgh the way led westward through Peoria, Illinois, and Des Moines and Omaha to Topeka, Kansas, where the poet had the largest audience in his platform history, not that he had more friends in Topeka than else-

where, but because the seating capacity of the Toler Auditorium was larger. Homeward bound he gave another night to Kansas City, and, as was his desire, terminated his tour December 14, 1903, at Logansport, Indiana,—that, as the sequel proved, being his farewell reading to the American people.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE

THE first to pay the academic compliment to the poet was Yale University. The honor came as a surprise, not only to Riley but to his friends everywhere, for it was well known that he was not a college man, hardly a product of the common schools. He was a man of letters, but "so far removed from the academic methods and manner, in both his work and in his personality," said the Indianapolis *Journal*, "that in the minds of those who know him best he is not in any way associated with the college idea."

The commencement exercises took place in Battell Chapel, June 25, 1902. "Mr. President," said Professor Bernadotte Perrin, the public orator of the day: "I have the honor to present to you for the honorary degree of Master of Arts, James Whitcomb Riley.

"This Hoosier has achieved the name, the fame, and the still more enviable influence of a national poet. His hundreds of thousands of readers come to love him as Whittier and Longfellow were loved. The rustic voices of his dialect have revealed Theocritean and Sicilian shepherds in our Indiana. The murmur of their voices, for countless men and women, is like Shakespeare's sleep,—'that knits up the raveled sleave of care.'"

Then arose "that striking figure," as Riley remarked afterward, "the right man in the right place,"

President Arthur Twining Hadley. "As an exponent of poetic arts in country life," said the president, "we hereby confer on you the degree of Master of Arts."

The hood appropriate to the degree was then placed on the poet's head—and he became a son of Old Eli.

After hearing Riley at the alumni dinner, some fears were expressed that he did not regard the honor with the dignity it deserved, although the cheering over what he said amounted to "a splendid ovation." In a graceful little speech he spoke of attending the commencement of a seventy-year-old college in Indiana, "but here was Yale one hundred and thirty years old when my little Indiana college was born. What surprises me however is that it took Yale two hundred years to give me the degree."

The poet was tremendously proud of the honor, then and ever after. He liked the statement of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who also received a degree, that we Americans, whether inside or outside the college, are working together for the greatest good of our great Republic, and he fondly repeated the Senator's words: "A rose in the hand is worth thousands placed upon a grave, and so to-day it is a great and glorious blessing to have honors in this world which money can not produce and which money can not buy."

The Indianapolis *News* thought the honor fairly distributed between Yale and Indiana. "All true as far as it goes," said the Chicago *Record-Herald*, "but Mr. Riley and Yale and Indiana are not the only recipients of the honor. He is an American poet, and the whole nation has a share in the honor which he has received."

Whether familiar with the poet in their childhood or not, the Yale students were always interested in Riley, "took to him," said Professor William Lyon Phelps, "as naturally as spring follows winter." The Yale courses in American Literature, since 1897 had included studies of the Hoosier Poet. Doctor Phelps had required critical essays on two Riley volumes, *Poems Here at Home* and *Neghborly Poems*. And to him is due the honor of first suggesting to the Yale Corporation that Riley receive a degree from that institution. He said: "A university can do nothing better than to recognize and formally mark with academic distinction, genuine creative work in literature."

In this connection Riley's admirers must always be grateful to the venerable Professor Henry A. Beers, who long before the degree was conferred said in his book on American literature that James Whitcomb Riley had become a national poet, indicating that he had taken the place left vacant by Longfellow.

At the commencement exercises Doctor Beers was the poet's right-hand man. "I can not quite see why geniuses like Mark Twain and Riley, whose books are read and loved by hundreds and thousands of their countrymen," he wrote subsequently, "should care very much for a college degree. The fact remains, however, that they are gratified by the compliment, which stamps their performances with a sort of official sanction. When Mr. Riley came on to New Haven to take his degree, he was a bit nervous about making a public appearance in unwonted conditions although he had been used to facing popular audiences with great applause when he gave his delightful readings from

his poems. He rehearsed the affair in advance, trying on his Master's gown and reading me his poem, 'No Boy Knows When He Goes to Sleep,' which he proposed to use if called on for a speech. He asked me if it would do: it did. For at the alumni dinner which followed the conferring of degrees, when Riley got to his feet and read the piece, the audience broke loose. It was evident whatever the learned gentlemen on the platform might think, the undergraduates and the young alumni knew their Riley; and that his enrolment on the Yale catalogue was far and away the most popular act of the day."

In Philadelphia, on Washington's birthday, 1904, the poet was honored by The University of Pennsylvania, the exercises taking place in the spacious Academy of Music, where for twenty years and more he had, at intervals, charmed great audiences with his public readings. It was an imposing spectacle, the governor of the state, the faculty, the trustees and other officers of the university filing in on the wide stage while the audience rose to the strains of *The Star-Spangled Banner.*

The Hoosier Poet's was the first name called. "We have invited to be present, James Whitcomb Riley, because he is a writer of immortal verse," began the Public Orator, Joseph Levering Jones. "He is a poet supremely idyllic," the orator continued, in part, "but in the deep glimpses that he gives of country life we see not Bacchus or Pan. He shuns the antique world. He lives, a free and aspiring modern, out under the heavens, where youth and energy dwell and opportunity extends her open hand. The imposing features of wealth and power inspire not his pen. His art is

inimitable when it deals with the humble, those undistinguished in life, where the emotions are still nobly primitive and loyalty and gentle devotion rule the heart and govern conduct.

"For these rare attributes in his felicitous verse and prose we, the Trustees, present him to the Provost that he may receive the degree of Doctor of Letters."

But one thing more was required to round out the patriotic program of the day, and that was the poet's contribution at the alumni dinner—his rendition of "The Name of Old Glory," which was received with tremendous applause.

No other western literary man had ever received the academic recognition that had been accorded Riley. "His reception was in every way most distinguished," said Meredith Nicholson. "He now has degrees from Yale and Pennsylvania, and neither of those institutions is in the habit of throwing honors around promiscuously."

Prior to the honors from Pennsylvania, the poet received a degree from Wabash College and subsequently one from Indiana University. "It is doubtful," said the Denver *Times*, "if in the whole field of American literature there could be found one whose recognition would meet with such universal approval. Riley has accomplished what no other poet before him and none of his contemporaries has succeeded in doing. He has created a place in literature which he has filled to the satisfaction of the great mass of the plain people for whom he speaks."

Having for twenty years been vindicated by the press, and now having the academic seal on his work,

it would seem that the foes of Riley's dialect, "the mosquito-minded critics," as Tarkington calls them, are seemingly left without occasion for their buzzing. It is scarcely wise any longer or popular to say that "his dialect poems are injuring Indiana's reputation for culture." The Hoosier parlance, which Riley subdued to rhyme, as William Dean Howells was wont to say, has not the consecration which time has given to the Scottish dialect in Burns, "but it says things as tenderly," adds Howells, "and as intimately, and on the lips of the Hoosier master it is music."

Happily for the foes of dialect there is *The Lockerbie Book,* containing all the poems Riley wrote in normal English. A companion volume is *The Hoosier Book,* containing the poems in dialect—two volumes collected and arranged by the able editor of the Bobbs-Merrill Company, Hewitt Hanson Howland. The poet dreamed of a time when all his poems would be collected in one volume. *The Lockerbie Book* was in part the fulfillment of that dream, and one shares his joy over the fact that the collection should be the work of Mr. Howland, who had been associated with him almost daily for twenty years in a friendship which had never once been darkened by a passing cloud. *The Lockerbie Book* was rather a surprise to the literary public,—the poet's claim that he had done his greatest work in normal English. He had three great friends, W. D. Howells, Mark Twain and John Hay, who held that his dialect poems were equally great. Whether posterity will sustain that opinion must be left to the winnowing of time. Meanwhile friends of the poet everywhere will share his delight over *The Lockerbie Book,* "the volume for the cultivated

classes," he said, meaning particularly those who eschew dialect; for it has to be said that the persistent severity of their criticism had often caused him to pace the floor.

A self-righteous few were for a long while concerned about the poet's salvation; and these also, at times, made the poet pace the floor. Once a revivalist, more ambitious than religious, gained entrance to Riley's room with a view to "saving his soul," as he termed it. Riley had been so busy writing poems that he had forgotten he had a soul, and he promptly let the intruder know it. The revivalist persisting, the poet picked up *his* Bible and said: "Let me read from the inspired word of Longfellow as recorded in 'The New England Tragedies.'" Lovers of Longfellow will surmise what he read—the sad picture of Poor Humanity turning from the narrow rules and the subtleties of the Schools and the bewildering cry, "lo, here! lo, there! the Church!"—turning back with bleeding feet

> "By the weary road it came
> Unto the simple thought
> By the great Master taught,
> And that remaineth still:
> *Not he that repeateth the name*
> *But he that doeth the will.*"

Widely different from the revivalist's was the attitude of the Church Federation of the poet's home city, in including him in its federated forces, "as a helpful interpreter of God and the humanities, and as a poetic preacher of goodness, kindness, mercy, and righteousness." As a minister said, "Riley made no formal

profession of religious belief, but over and over again his trust in the Eternal Goodness found expression." That is fact, and it is good to record that a clergyman said it. "I am a Newlite," said Riley, "a Hicksite, a Methodist, a Probationer, a Publican, a Sinner; I belong to the Great Church of Mankind. They (the clergymen) have their pulpits and I have mine. They in their province and I in my poor, unprofessional way are contributing to the redemption of the world."

"In his sixties," said Hugh H. Hanna of Indianapolis, "our poet was detained in Lockerbie Street to receive the plaudits of the press and the people"—his delicate way of referring to the poet's disability, in his summing up the unusual life-history. It was not for him, or any other friend of literature, so Mr. Hanna thought, to lament the invalid years, for the facts are that the poet was neither physically nor mentally active in that period. For six years he experienced "the cords of affliction." His friends missed him along his daily walk in the shade of the trees between the Monument and Lockerbie Street. But he was seldom too feeble or despondent to joke about his affliction, saying "it was not thus with the Little Man in his debonair days, when he wore his tie under his left ear," and so forth.

It was noteworthy that the poet could smile over what seemed to others his misfortune. Each winter he had sufficient strength to go to the warm coast of Florida, and seldom was there a summer afternoon in Indianapolis when he did not ride through the streets or out into the country, in his limousine, and greet his friends from its window, with "the old twinkling response and the wave of the hand—the left hand."

Fortunate he was in those paralytic days to have always at call his nephew, Edmund H. Eitel, the "Knightly Rider of the Knee" in *Rhymes of Childhood,* who, grown to manhood, rendered the poet rare service as traveling companion, private secretary, and collector and editor of the Biographical Edition of the poet's works.

In 1910 "the cords of affliction" were drawn tighter. Thence to the end it seemed the people could not heap honors enough on their benefactor. The poet had accumulated a considerable fortune, although he had given freely, his most munificent gift being one of seventy-five thousand dollars to the Indianapolis Public Library. Thus, in the entrance to that institution, the bronze tablets with the following inscription:

THESE GATES ARE THE GIFT
OF THE
CHILDREN OF INDIANAPOLIS
IN LOVING REMEMBRANCE
OF THEIR FRIEND
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

With the opening of the year 1911 Riley was much concerned over the multiplicity of Riley celebrations. He had been the guest of honor on so many occasions that he began to grow uneasy. There was a pathetic side to applause. The public was fickle, and might some night when his friends were napping, snatch him down from his pedestal. The truth was that all along the way he had wondered over so much demonstration. "It makes a fellow feel mighty humble when folks do things like this," he said of his reception

at the World's Fair. After receiving his Yale degree he said, "I just wanted to get behind the door and hide myself."

"Just the humblest of humble servants," he said, after his election to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and his reception of the gold medal for poetry; "I want to get down on my marrow-bones and never, *never* hug myself again."

Still the avowals of public affection continued. At a state convention in 1910, the Indiana Federation of Women's Clubs, acting on a resolution introduced by Mrs. Minnie Belle Mitchell of Greenfield, had voted to celebrate the poet's birthday. The school authorities, being in sympathy with the movement, instructed the teachers and children of Indiana to observe October seventh as Riley Day. When, the next year, the poet discovered that the state was serious about the celebration, he addressed a letter to the children of his home city, who were revealing the year of his birth, which he had kept secret since his young manhood:

528 Lockerbie Street.

To the School Children of Indianapolis:

You are conspirators—every one of you, that's what you are—you have conspired to inform the general public of my birthday, and I am already so old that I want to forget all about it. But I will be magnanimous and forgive you, for I know that your intent is really friendly, and to have such friends as you are makes me—don't care how old I am! In fact it makes me so glad and happy that I feel as absolutely young and spry as a very schoolboy—even as one of you—and so to all intents I am.

Therefore let me be with you throughout the long, lovely day, and share your mingled joys and blessings

with your parents and your teachers. "God bless us every one."

Ever gratefully and faithfully,

Your old friend,

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

The "conspirators" had so successfully done their work that serenades became the fashion in Lockerbie Street. There came also to the poet congratulatory messages from other states and from Canada—one from the school authorities of Kentucky, and another from the superintendent of the bureau of libraries of New York State to the effect that five hundred thousand children were ready to participate in the observance of Riley Day.

His greeting for 1912 was addressed to children everywhere:

528 Lockerbie Street.

To the School Children Generally:

It may be well for you to remember that the day you are about to celebrate is the birthday of many good men, but if I may be counted the least of these, I will be utterly content and happy. I can only thank you and your teachers with a full heart and the fervent hope that the day will prove an equal glory to us all.

To the Very Little Children:

I would say—be simply yourselves, and though even parents, as I sometimes think—do not seem to understand us perfectly, we will be patient with them and love them no less loyally and very tenderly.

Most truly your hale friend and comrade,

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

Friendly authors contributed to the general enthusiasm. Meredith Nicholson congratulated the children on the fact that poetry had not gone out of fashion. "It is a great thing," he said, "to have living among us a man who has sent his messages of faith and confidence into the minds and hearts of people in every part of the world."

A characteristic word to the Indianapolis *Star*, dated October 6, 1912, came from our "Modern Æsop," of Brook, Indiana:

Our own Riley is the one distinguished son of Indiana whose life and works are the very essence of the Hoosier State. Benjamin Harrison might have been a Bostonian. General Lew Wallace might have been a New Yorker. Booth Tarkington, with his tales of chivalry and tender sentiment, might have come out from Virginia. But Riley could not have been anything but a Hoosier, and possibly it was preordained a thousand years ago that he should be born in Greenfield. He has known his friends and neighbors to the very core, and he has revealed them to us with literary skill, combined with drollery, humor, honest philosophy, and kindness of heart.

One can not know the plain people of Indiana except by living among them all his life and reading Riley. The man's evasion of all dress parades of literature, his quiet contempt for ceremonies and displays, and his real sympathy for everything humble and genuine, regardless of labels, have endeared him to us. When such a rare soul is also one of the few masters of verse it is not surprising that the whole state wishes to do him honor.

GEORGE ADE.

The next year Anderson, Indiana, gave to the poet the keys to the city. For a quarter-century he had

been disinclined to any public appearance there, not being able to dismiss from memory recollections of the Poe Poem, and his heart-breaking failure in an entertainment at the old Union Hall, as well as his obscure departure from the town.

But there came a day when all things in the way of a reception to him were written in capitals and italics,

"When forgetting all the sorrow
He had had,
He could fold away his fears,
And put by his foolish tears,
And through all the coming years
Just be glad"—

a day when he read from his books, a grand ovation at the Grand Opera House, a sympathetic audience that overflowed on the stage, a demand for seats that exceeded the supply by one thousand, a disappointed audience outside so large and persistent that the police had to guard the aisles and doorways—an evening when newspaper representatives and traction car delegations came from neighboring towns, when children brought bouquets to the footlights, and Anderson presented her guest a loving cup.

Was there anything more that Anderson could do? There was—so much more that the ovation at the Grand had to take second place. The first week in June, 1913, the industrial, commercial, educational, fraternal, and municipal interests of the city joined in a "Made-in-Anderson" exhibition, and not forgetting that the city had conspicuously contributed to the making of a poet, Tuesday was set apart as Riley Day.

The poet went to Anderson in his automobile, accompanied by friends, and all along the road the farmers and their families gathered at gateways to see him pass. Leading citizens of Anderson met him at Pendleton, and from there, a distance of eight miles, it was a procession of automobiles with the poet's car in the lead. In West Eighth Street the children of the city greeted him, and as he passed literally covered him and his machine with flowers.

In front of the Court House the throng of welcomers was so dense that the poet's car was stopped. Almost overpowered with the tenderness of his welcome, he rose in his car and in a voice tremulous with emotion, said: "Citizens of Anderson, and you, little children, who have so wonderfully greeted me, I have no words to express to you what is in my heart at this moment. This is the happiest day of my life. I thank you for your generous welcome. I thank you for your beautiful flowers. With all my heart, I thank you—I thank you."

When at the conclusion of the celebration the poet left for home, his automobile was bedecked with strands of red clover plucked from fields he had strolled over in youth. Flowers and bouquets from the homes of old-time friends were tossed into the car, and as he drove away, his face aglow with gratitude, he murmured: "A wonderful day; one of God's wonderful days!"

In November, on his way south, the poet was detained in Cincinnati, where several thousand school children brought flowers to his reception in Music Hall. On his birthday a month before, nearly three thousand children had marched in parade through

From a Photograph of the Poet in His Latter Years—1913

Henry Watterson—Age Seventy-eight—Staunch Friend of the Poet for Thirty Years

Lockerbie Street. Is it any wonder that his poem, "Dream-March," came with its army of fairy banners to vivify his sunset days? Brave boys and girls marching out of Morning-Land, turning never home again—only in dreams—

"Where go the children? Travelling! Travelling!
Where go the children, travelling ahead?
Some go to conquer things; some go to try them;
Some go to dream them; and some go to bed."

On the approach of the birthday, 1915, there came a proclamation from the Governor, the only one of its kind in the annals of literature. After briefly referring to the poet's history, the proclamation said:

"Whether the arch above his head was at times one of sunshine or one of cloud, all recognized that in the depths of his soul there was love for his fellowman and adoration for his God. Whether he was painting signs or writing verses, the people were his study. He familiarized himself with their manners and customs and characteristics, and with melody and sweetness and a singular gift of invention, he told them things about themselves they did not know. This is why they have always loved him.

"More than any other citizen of Indiana, James Whitcomb Riley has carried the fame of his native state into the schools and homes of the world. It is not strange therefore that there should be a widespread feeling among our people that the anniversary of his birth should be celebrated in honor of his poetic genius and his literary achievements, and in recognition of his contributions to society.

"He is the children's poet, and he has become such because he has so much of the spirit of the One who said, Suffer little children to come unto me. All Indi-

ana will rejoice therefore to see her children afforded an opportunity to place their heart wreaths upon his brow and strew their flowers about his feet.

"Now, therefore, I, Samuel M. Ralston, as Governor of the State of Indiana, hereby designate and proclaim the seventh day of October, A. D., 1915, the anniversary of the birth of James Whitcomb Riley, as Riley Day; and I urge all the people of the state to arrange in their respective communities, in their own way, appropriate public exercises in their schools and at their other public meeting places; and that they display the American flag at their homes and places of business on this day, in honor of Indiana's most beloved citizen."

There came also a word from the National Commissioner of Education, who had directed that the seventh of October be observed as Riley Day by all of the Public, Private, and Parochial Schools of the United States. This word and the governor's proclamation lifted the poet into the seventh heaven of delight, and he did not hesitate to let his near friends know his feeling. Equally delighted he was over an editorial in the *Christian Science Monitor*. That Indiana proposed to recognize a poet formally was, according to the Boston daily, something new in history, something that Massachusetts never did for Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry W. Longfellow, or New York for William Cullen Bryant. The paper went on to institute a comparison between Riley and Lincoln. While Riley's courage and good will had shown in less conspicuous ways than Lincoln's, it had also been admirable, and as Indiana honored her son the nation would look on approvingly.

"You have to think of Riley in his right setting," said the *Monitor*, "doing much the same humanizing work as a poet, that Lincoln did as a statesman, and with the same instruments—pathos, humor, and sincere love of men as men."

Applause for the poet was at high tide in Indianapolis, October 7, 1915. During the day messages came to Lockerbie Street from the length and breadth of the land, an exceptional one from the office of Secretary Franklin K. Lane, head of the Federal Bureau of Education, telling of the nation-wide celebration of the poet's birthday by the school children. By nation-wide was not meant that the celebrations were formal in all states and cities. They were informal, for instance, in Chicago, St. Paul, and at the Panama Exposition, San Francisco; and formal in West Virginia, Jacksonville, Florida, Washington City, and Pittsburgh, three thousand teachers in the latter city heartily joining in the exercises, while eighty thousand children, so the message read, tuned their hearts to the lines of "The Old Swimmin'-Hole" and "The Raggedy Man." With other felicitations came cable messages from Europe—from Walter H. Page in London, Brand Whitlock in Belgium, and Henry Van Dyke in the Netherlands.

National interest in the anniversary centered in a banquet in the poet's honor in what has since been called the Riley Room in the Claypool Hotel, Indianapolis. The banquet had been recommended by a general committee of more than one hundred prominent citizens, Charles Warren Fairbanks being the chairman and also the toastmaster on the occasion.

In one particular at least the Riley banquet differed from many others; the committee did not have to beg for guests. Although there were four hundred plates at ten dollars a plate, the demand exceeded the supply by hundreds. As Walt Mason wrote in his fluent way, "If all who love him could be there, to greet the bard beyond compare, they'd need a banquet hall so great, that it would reach across the state."

The speakers and the toasts to which they responded were as follows:

Governor Samuel M. Ralston—"The State of Indiana."
Colonel George Harvey—"Why Is James Whitcomb Riley?"
Doctor John H. Finley—"From Cadmus to Riley."
Young E. Allison—"Our Southern Cousins."
Albert J. Beveridge—"Friendship."
William Allen White—"The Day We Celebrate."
George Ade—"The Center Table."
Senator John W. Kern—"Riley in the Making."

"This great banquet, my friends," said Vice-President Fairbanks, before introducing the speakers, "graced by so many men who have achieved distinction in the world of letters, statesmanship, religion, education, business, and other honorable spheres in every walk of life, is a spontaneous creation; it had its origin in spontaneity, which emphasizes its significance; it sprang out of a universal desire to pay homage to one of the most gifted among us—a friend and benefactor of his day and generation. It is a happy circumstance that our governor has by executive proclamation set aside to-day as Riley Day in

Indiana. It is significant also that the day is being celebrated in the schools of other states. This is a distinction as deserved as it is unique. The heart of millions of our countrymen have been touched by his poems, and the influence of the Hoosier Poet will go on as the years pass in stately procession. James Whitcomb Riley is in truth the uncrowned king of young America. He is their idol; the fragrance of his wholesome influence has become a part of their lives."

That all the speakers would be warmly greeted on an occasion that was keyed to the highest pitch of sympathetic enthusiasm, was a foregone conclusion. At the close of his speech, Senator Kern, on behalf of the Union Soldiers of Indiana, presented to the poet a beautiful silk flag, made especially for the celebration.

Referring to the unexampled success of the banquet, William Fortune of the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce said: "I have never known anything like the feeling that has characterized the whole undertaking. With his great gifts of expression, Mr. Riley seems to find words quite inadequate. It is of course unnecessary for him to say anything. The people are merely responding to what he has been so beautifully saying for them all through his life."

Yet the poet—with wavering voice under the pressure of deep emotions—did contrive to say something.

"Then came the climax of a perfect evening," says the press report, "Mr. Riley's own tribute to friends, old and new, many of the old among the departed, but still tenderly remembered. The poet was greeted with the warmth that marks well the affection in

which he is held everywhere. The guests stood and voiced their feelings in a happy salutation."

After eulogizing the friends departed the poet said: "And there is a gladness all along the line, from the first immortal entrance of jovial character to the very present company to-night—the faces all filled with the like pleasure and happiness. And to this presence here I make my glad obeisance and my thanks as well to those friends in alien quarters who have so kindly sent their words of cheer and Godspeed. And the distinguished guests who have spoken in tribute here may be sure of my most feeling gratitude.

"And may I express particular appreciation for the words of the President of our beloved country, who has found opportunity in the stress and worry of these imperiled times to remember and to honor us with his participancy in the spirit of the hour. And no less are we all grateful for the message of Mr. Howells, our master of letters—the master, worthy as beloved, and beloved as worthy.

"To him, to these, to all you and every one—I thank you—and, in the words of little Tim Cratchit, 'God bless us every one.'"

Since the poet mentioned with particular appreciation Mr. Howells and the President, their greetings follow in full:

York Harbor, Maine, September 5, 1915.

I would gladly come to the Riley-Fest if I were not so nearly seventy-nine years old, with all the accumulated abhorrences of joyful occasions which that lapse of time implies. But I can not really be away whenever Riley is spoken of. Give him my dearest love

and all such honor as one of the least may offer one of the greatest of our poets.

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.

The White House, Washington, September 1, 1915.

I am sorry to say it will not be possible for me to be present at the banquet which the citizens of Indianapolis are planning to give in honor of James Whitcomb Riley; but I want to ask you if you will not be generous enough to convey to Mr. Riley on that occasion a message of cordial regard and admiration from me. I wish that I might be present to render my tribute of affectionate appreciation to him for the many pleasures he has given me, along with the rest of the great body of readers of English. I think he has every reason to feel on his birthday that he has won the hearts of his countrymen.

WOODROW WILSON.

If there was ever any danger that local pride would "distort the view and magnify beyond recognition the object of the eulogy," that danger vanished in the flood of congratulations on the poet's last birthday. After the banquet it could be truly said that love for him was national and the voice of eulogy American. Carolyn Wells could list him "in the very small group who have earned the right to sit on the classic step between the sublime and the ridiculous," and Meredith Nicholson could affirm that "Riley is the cheeriest and hopefulest spirit in American literature," and Robert Underwood Johnson could say that the Riley songs "were drawn from the deepest wells of human experience," and Henry Watterson wrote:

Louisville, October 5, 1915.

No one can have approved the proceedings more heartily than myself. Honors like this rarely come to

a living man—never before came to any poet, living or dead. If any lure could tempt me from a resolution not to impose myself on my audience, it would be this occasion, the call to join in fitting and willing homage to an old friend. In Kentucky's name I send Kentucky's greeting. Your Governor has done something more than distinguish himself, in reinvoking the Golden Age of Song and reminding the world that there is poetry as well as life in the old land yet. The official designation of the seventh of October as Riley Day celebrates the state of Indiana hardly less than Riley himself, Indiana's best-beloved citizen.

More than any American poet Riley will live as the people's poet. With Burns of Scotland, and Béranger of France, he already forms a blessed and immortal trinity, which will carry the folk songs of three races to after ages, when the versifiers of the highbrows are forgotten. Reading Riley—drinking the while a toast to the day—the world may feel, and even above the clash of arms may exultant shout: "There is yet a little sugar in the bottom of the glass."

God be with you and may Riley Day become perennial.

HENRY WATTERSON.

In 1906 Riley remarked that he would not live to see sixty. Five years later, in his sixty-second year, after a paralytic stroke, he said, "I have finished my work; my end has come." The news traveled over the wires and newspapers everywhere prepared their obituaries.

But the end did not come. A month before the dinner in his honor, he said cheerfully, "I feel like a boy. I have not felt so strong in years. I drive out in my car and am enjoying life in spite of the war in Europe." He went on to say that he had quit read-

ing the newspapers that he might avoid the story of pain and weeping.

Some forty years before the banquet, an obscure country weekly took notice of an initial paper in the *Earlhamite* by J. W. Riley, "a poem by a Hoosier poet unknown to fame," ran the item, "which betrays the touch of genius in every line." Whoever wrote the item judged truly. The poem was "Fame," in which the poetic deity comes tardily through the door to crown a homeless, lifeless artist and sculptor. Then gazing down a dismal vista the poet regards the fate of all poets, lonely wandering, aimlessly journeying on through life without even a kindly touch for the burning brow, and the end a dreary defeat:

"And this is Fame! A thing indeed,
That only comes when least the need:
The wisest minds of every age
The book of life from page to page
Have searched in vain; each lesson conned
Will promise it the page beyond."

How really different was the journey's end for Riley!

After passing his sixty-sixth milestone, he was feeling so much like a boy that time seemed to promise "many returns of the day." He went south as usual to Miami, Florida, for the winter, and in May returned to Indianapolis and his daily rides about the city, well and happy with apparently many days of quiet contentment before him. But the end was not far away, for on Saturday night, July twenty-second, at ten minutes of eleven, the poet, having retired, asked for

a glass of water and turning on his side fell asleep. As gently as twilight comes, came the summons from the Silent Land.

THE END

INDEX

INDEX

Abbott, Lyman, 220.
Ade, George, 228, 384, 400, 406.
Adjustable Lunatic, 324.
Afterwhiles: 205; publication (1887), 226, 274, 280, 337, 346, 350.
Agassiz, Louis, 339.
Alcott, Bronson, 71, 267.
Aldrich, Thomas Bailey, 180, 277.
Alexander, D. S., 30, 77-8.
Allison, Young E., 406.
American Notes, 224.
Anderson, Indiana, 14-7.
Anderson Democrat, 17, 59, 315, 322.
Anderson Herald, 17.
Anderson, Mary, 13, 244, 287.
Andrews, Mrs. M. L., 229.
Armazindy, 345-6, 350.
Arnold, Matthew, 191-5.
Assassin, The, 345.
Atlanta Constitution, criticism of Riley, 279.
Atlantic Monthly, The, 118, 135-7.
At Rest, 205.
August, 53, 347.
Autumn Leaves Is Falling, The, 253.
Autumnal Extravaganza, An, 32.
Away, composition of, 326.

Babyhood, 30, 32.
Ban, The, 146.
Bard of Deer Creek, The, 202.
Bates, Henry, 94.
Bear Story, The: 78, 88, 94; source, 349.
Beautiful City, The, 202, 329.
Beecher, Henry Ward, 327.
Beers, Henry A., 391.
Beetle, The, 25-6.
Being a Boy, 280.
Benefit for Actors' Fund (Nov. 15, 1888), 244.
Bereaved: 271; composition of, 325.
Beveridge, Albert J., 406.
Billings, Josh, *See Josh Billings.*
Billy Could Ride, 203, 207.
Biographical Edition of Riley, 345.

Blake, William, influence on Riley, 319-20.
Bloomington, Indiana, 47.
Blossoms in the Trees, 202.
Blue Bird, The, 368.
Blue Grass Club of Louisville, Ky., 263.
Bobbs-Merrill Company, The, 211, 345, 394.
Bobbs, William C., 347.
Bolton, Mrs. Sarah T., 135.
Book of Joyous Children, 345, 349.
Boone County Pastoral, A, 151.
Booth, Franklin, Edition of *Flying Islands*, 347.
Boss Girl, The: 209-14; circular about, 212.
Boston Advertiser, The, 30.
Boston Pilot, The, 135, 155.
Bottsford, Louise, 115.
Bowen-Merrill Company, 345.
Boy from Zeeny, The, 70, 228, 288.
Boys, The, 202.
Brave Love, 82.
Bret Harte of Indiana, The, 94.
Bride, A, 25.
British Painters, 319.
Bryan, William Lowe, 94.
Bryant, William C., 328, 404.
Bryce, J. Burt, 35.
Burdette, Robert J.: 44-52, 143, 151, 153, 165, 183, 184, 234, 263; criticism of *Lockerbie Street*, 292, 340.
Burlington Hawkeye, 48, 143.
Burns, Robert, 6, 83, 332, 394.
Buzz Club Papers, 7, 34, 36.

Cable, George W., 215, 222, 234, 242.
Caller from Boone, A, 149-50.
Cambridge City, Indiana, 97.
Carman, Bliss, 275, 293.
Carnegie, Andrew, 305.
Carpenter, Frank G., 269, 293.
Carr, George, 59-60.
Catherwood, Mary Hartwell, 27-9, 102, 131, 171, 225.
Cawein, Madison, 266, 335.
Century Magazine, The, 137, 165-6, 297, 326.
Champion Checker Player of Ameriky, The, 96.
Characteristics of Hoosier Dialect, 187.
Characteristics of Western Humor, 201.
Chicago Herald, editorial on Riley, 308-9.
Chicago Inter-Ocean, 361-2.
Chicago Mail, 260.
Chicago Record-Herald, 390.

Chicago Tribune, 77.
Chickering Hall (N. Y. C.), 215, 220, 242.
Child of Waterloo, A, 3.
Child's Home Long Ago, A, 208.
Child Rhymes, 346.
Child World, A: 345, 348-9; published in London, 350-351.
Chimney Corner, The, 3, 292.
Christian Science Monitor, 404.
Christine Braidly (pen-name of Mrs. Catherwood), 28-9.
Christy, Howard Chandler, 346.
Christy-Riley Series, 347.
Cincinnati Post, 386-7.
Claypool Hotel (Indianapolis), 405.
Clemens, Samuel: 215; letter to Foulke about Riley at W. A. W. dinner, 1888, 231; *see Mark Twain.*
Clickwad, Mr., 34-7.
Clover, The, 155.
Coburn, General John, 53.
Collyer, Robert, 220.
Coon Dog Wess, 312.
Copyright League program, 220.
Coquelin, 369.
Counterfitters' Nest, The, 154.
Country Pathway, A, 347.
Cow Phenomenon, 234.
Craqueodoom, explanation of, 322-4.
Crawfordsville, Indiana, 14.
Crosby, Dr. Howard, 222.
Crow's Nest, The, Riley's study, 105-6, 277, 317.
Curly Locks, 207.
Curtis, George W., letter about Riley at W. A. W. dinner, 1888, 231, 274.

Dallas, Mary Kyle, 82.
Daly, Augustine, 2, 242.
Dana, Charles A.: influence on Riley, 125-30; letters, 127, 130, 351; letter, 352.
Danbury News Man, *The*, 18.
Dan Paine: 32; quoted, 249.
Dave Field, 207.
Davis, John, 369.
Dawn, 31.
Dead in Sight of Fame, 56.
Dead Rose (Riley's study), 104, 107, 109, 113, 116, 277.
Dead Selves, 54.
Dead Wife, The, 197.
Debs, Eugene V., 258.
Decoration Day on the Place, 360.

Deer Crick, 234.
Denison House (Indianapolis), 286.
Denver Times, The, 393.
Dialect in Literature (paper in 1890), 281-2.
Dickens, Charles: 8, 107; influence on Riley, 172, 319, 349, 383, 386.
Dickenson's Grand Opera House (Indianapolis), 96.
Dicktown Wonder, The, 188.
Divine Emblems, 158.
Dodds, Mary L., 138-9.
Dooley, Mr., 305.
Dot Leedle Boy of Mine, 86, 347.
Dream of Autumn, A, 32.
Dreams, 125.
Dumas, Alexandre, 287.
Dunbar, Hamilton J., 56.
Dunbar House, 101.
Durbin, Gov. Winfield T., 365.
Dusk, 31.

Earlhamite, The, 411.
Eccentric Mr. Clark, The, 70.
Eccentricities of Western Humor, The, 187.
Eitel, Edmund H., 397.
Eitel, Henry, 226, 276.
Eli and How He Got There, 186.
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 304, 335, 404.
Enduring, The, 277.
Envoy, quoted, 350.

Fairbanks, Charles W.: 383, 405; tribute to Riley, 406-7.
Fame, 53, 101, 125, 211, 411.
Farm Rhymes, 346.
Farmer Whipple—Bachelor, 8, 82, 223, 347.
Fessler's Bees, 234.
Field, Eugene, 121, 234, 257.
Finley, John H., 406.
Fishback, William P., 261-2.
Flying Islands of the Night, The, 33, 34, 36-8, 128, 142, 322, 345.
Forsaken Merman, The, 191.
Fortune, William, 407.
Foster, John W., 365.
Foulke, William Dudley, 229.
Frog, The, 315.
From Delphi, 203.
Frost on the Punkin, The, 312.
Funny Little Fellow, The, 48-9.

Garfield, James A., 345.

Garland, Hamlin: criticism of *Afterwhiles*, 226, 269.
Giant on the Show-Bills, The, 70.
Gilder, Jeanette, 221.
Glenarm Club (Denver), 263.
Glimpse of Pan, 335.
Girl I Loved, The, 347.
God Bless Us Every One, 32.
Gould, Judge J. H., 205.
Grand Opera House entertainment, 1888, (Indianapolis), 227-8.
Grand Point, 222.
Grant, 205.
Grant, Ulysses S., death, 205-7, 266, 362.
Grant and Colfax campaign (*see Vol. I*), 203.
Greeley, Horace, 241.
Greenfield Commercial, 8.
Greenfield Dramatic Club, 5.
Green Fields and Running Brooks, 345, 348.
Griggsby's Station, 207, 370.

Hadley, Arthur T., 390.
Halford, Elijah W., 67, 227.
Hancock Democrat, 155.
Hanna, Hugh H., 396.
Happy Little Cripple, The, 176.
Harding, George, 64, 93.
Harelip, The, 217.
Harper, The, 329.
Harper's Monthly, 135, 137.
Harris, Captain, 373.
Harris, Joel Chandler, 232, 304, 333.
Harrison, Benjamin, 67, 229, 248, 363.
Harry Gilbert Company, 4.
Harte, Bret: 18, 83; on choosing a profession, 330, 333.
Harvey, George, 406.
Hay, John: letter to Riley, 83; advice to Riley, 274; letter about *Rhymes of Childhood*, 284; 394.
Hays, Dr. Franklin W., 104.
Her Beautiful Hands, 36, 254, 329, 347.
Herr Weiser, 204.
His Pa's Romance, 345.
Hitt, George C., 159-60, 174, 180, 211.
Holland, J. G., 309.
Holstein, Major Charles L., 298, 341.
Home Again with Me, 347.
Home Folks, 345.
Home, Sweet Home, 277.
Homestead Edition, 150, 345.
Home Voyage, The, 357.

Hope, 144-5.
Hoosier Book, The, 394.
Hough, Judge (Greenfield), 130.
How Dutch Frank Found His Voice, 254.
Howe, Julia Ward, 378-9.
Howells, William Dean: 136, 180, 215, 273; criticism of *Rhymes of Childhood*, 283; 394; letter to Riley on birthday, 1915, 408.
Howland, Hewitt Hanson, 394.
Howland, Livingstone, 261-2.
Hubbard, Elbert, 332.
Huckleberry Finn, 200.
Hunchley, Mr., 34.
Hunt, Leigh, 108, 111.
Hut of Refuge, The, 103-4.

If I Knew What the Poets Know, 31.
Ike Walton's Prayer, 207.
In the Dark, 56.
Indianapolis, 47.
Indianapolis Journal, 51, 54, 56-76, 80, 89, 101, 103, 104, 113, 146, 150-3, 157, 199, 207, 226-7, 291, 314, 345-6, 389.
Indianapolis Literary Club's reception for Riley, 260-1.
Indianapolis News, 26, 93, 249, 290.
Indianapolis people, 37.
Indianapolis Saturday Herald, 23, 31-9, 60, 64, 90, 93, 144, 226.
Indianapolis Sentinel, 92.
Indianapolis Star, 400.
International Copyright League, 215.
Iron Horse, The, 347.
Irving, Henry, 242, 369.

Jacob Hind's Child, motif, 309-10.
James Whipcord Riley, 294.
Jamesy, 61.
Jefferson, Joseph, 13.
Jimpsy, 294.
Johnson, Benjamin F., of Boone, 146, 148-56, 170, 360.
Johnson, Robert Underwood, 165, 409.
Johnson, Samuel, 316.
Jones, Joseph Levering, tribute to Riley, 392.
Jones, Roselind, 146.
Josh Billings: 18; letter to Riley, 185; Riley's poem on, 186, 195.
June at Woodruff, 271.

Kansas City Star, 260.
Keats, John, 33.
Kern, John W., 406-7.
Kickshaws, 119.

Kingry's Mill, 187.
Kipling, Rudyard: 109, 269; letter to Riley, 311, 371.
Kissing the Rod, 271.
Knee-deep in June: 187, 202; criticism by Lowell, 224.
Knight, Joseph: 33; comment on Riley, 314.
Kokomo Dispatch, 20, 23, 25, 27-33.
Kokomo Tribune, 43, 119, 143.

La-Ker-bie, quoted, 298.
Landis, Charles B., introduction of Riley, 385.
Lane, Franklin K., 405
Lang, Andrew, 287.
Lanier House, 245.
Lebanon, Indiana, 74.
Legend Glorified, The, 329.
LeRoy Kingen, 294.
Let Something Good Be Said, 55.
Lewisville, Indiana, 19.
Life Lesson, A, 114.
Lily-Bud, 375.
Lincoln, Abraham, 332.
Lippincott's Magazine, 137.
Little Attenuated Capability, The, 187.
Little Man in the Tin Shop, The, 263.
Little Oak Man, The, 294.
Little Orphant Annie, 117, 228, 370, 384.
Little Red Apple Tree, The, 271.
Little Tommy Smith, 96.
Little Town of Tailholt, The, 32.
Lockerbie Book, The, 394.
Lockerbie Street (1893), 289-99.
Lockerbie Street: quoted, 290; composition and publication, 291-2; quoted, 299.
Locomotive Fireman's Magazine, 23.
Lodge, Henry Cabot, 390.
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 30, 42, 148, 178, 302, 308, 316, 329, 368, 376, 389, 395, 404.
Lost Love, A, 25.
Lost Path, The, 40.
Lowell, James Russell, 152, 215-9, 221, 224-5.

McCutcheon, George Barr, 229, 384.
Macauley, Daniel, 89, 93, 178.
Macy, A. W., 101.
Mahala Ashcraft, 312.
Major, Charles, 384.
Man without a Country, A, 353.
Marion, Francis, 140.

Marion, Indiana, 2.
Mark Twain: 18, 164, 187, 234; *How to Tell a Story*, 247, 333, 361, 391, 394. (See *Samuel Clemens.*)
Martindale, E. B.: 56; letter to Riley, 57, 58, 60-1, 65.
Mason, Walt, 406.
Matthews, Newton, 156, 213, 216, 271.
Memorial Edition of Riley, 346.
Mercury, 142-3.
Merrill, Meigs & Company, 161.
Miles' Restaurant, 64.
Mishawaka Enterprise, 144.
Mitchell, Mrs. Minnie Belle, 398.
'Mongst the Hills o' Somerset, 254.
Monrovia, Indiana, Riley at, 9-13.
Monument for Soldiers, A, quoted, 366.
Moon-Drowned, 32.
Mooresville Herald, 9.
Morgue, The, 102-3, 107, 109-11, 115, 121, 277, 317.
Morning, 345.
Morton, Oliver P., 326.
Mother-Song, A, 40.
Mr. Bryce, 7.
Mr. Trillpipe on Puns, 71.
My Bride That Is to Be, 40.
My First *Spectacles*, 116.
My Henry, 25, 27.
My Hot Displeasure, 189-90.
My Old Friend William Leachman, 154.
My Philosophy, 199.
Myers, W. R., 122.

Name of Old Glory, The, 278, 393.
Nasby, Petroleum V., 18.
Neghborly Poems, 156, 344-5, 391.
New England Tragedies, The, 395.
New, Harry S., 66-7.
New, John C., 71.
New York Evening Post, 30.
New York Independent, 23.
New York Sun: 125, 127, 130; criticism of Riley, 223, 351.
New York Tribune, 27.
New York World, 222, 239, 264.
Newcastle Mercury, 23, 30-1.
Nicholas, Anna, 67, 169, 314, 331.
Nicholson, Meredith, 228, 269, 384, 393, 400, 409.
Night, 31.
No Boy Knows When He Goes to Sleep, 392.
Nothing to Say, 116, 137, 222, 238.

Nye, "Bill": 64, 216; letter to Riley, 217; criticism of *Afterwhiles*, 226; at Indianapolis, 235; at Danville, Ill., 236; characterization of Riley, 237, 243, 254, 259, 289, 306, 376.
Nye, Frank M., 348.

Object Lesson, The, 51, 77, 86-8; 94, 196, 222.
Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington, 206.
Ode to Thomas A. Hendricks, 279.
Old Band, The, 254.
Old-Fashioned Roses, 32, 59, 84-5, 254, 372.
Old Fiddler, The, 70.
Old Man and Jim, The, 228, 361.
Old Settler's Story, The, 343.
Old Soldier's Story, The, 187, 245.
Old Sweetheart of Mine, An, 57, 82, 101, 125, 346, 375.
Old Swimmin' Hole, and 'Leven More Poems, The: 151; publication, 159-60; preface, 162; contents, 163; 197, 201, 209, 222.
On the Banks o' Deer Crick, 207-8.
Open Letter, quoted, 317.
O'Reilly, John Boyle, 155, 178, 180, 230.
O'Rell, Max, comment on Riley, 242.
Our Kind of Man, 205.
Out to Old Aunt Mary's, 242, 347.

Page, Walter H., 405.
Paine, Albert Bigelow, 68.
Paine, Dan: 26; letter to Riley, 248, 347.
Papyrus Club, 179.
Parker, Benjamin S., 30-1, 38, 71, 142, 229, 317.
Park Theater Benefit (1879), 227.
Parkhurst, Charles L., 220.
Passing of a Heart, The, 25.
Payne, John Howard, 277.
Peace Hymn of the Republic, The, composition of, 379.
Peoria Call, The, 24-5, 30.
Perkins, Eli, 18.
Perrin, Bernadotte, 389.
Phelps, William Lyon, admiration of Riley, 391.
Philips, Charles, 42.
Phillips, Wendell, 179.
Pipes o' Pan, 254, 337, 343.
Pittsburgh Dispatch, criticism of Riley-Nye tour, 252.
Pittsburgh Gazette, 338, 387.
Pixy People, The, 329.
Poe, Edgar Allan, 39, 192.
Poems Here at Home, 345-6, 391.
Poet of the Future, The, composition of, 254, 326.
Poetry and Character, 177.

Pond Lyceum Bureau, 242, 244, 254.
Poor Man's Wealth, A, 111, 202.
"Pop" June's Restaurant, 67.
Prayer Perfect, The, 55.
Press Club: (Chicago meeting, 1880,) report by Nye, 239-40; speech by Riley, 240-1.

Quarles, Francis, 158.

Ralston, Samuel M., 404, 406.
Reach Your Hand to Me, 55.
Ream, Laura, 67-8.
Redpath Lyceum Bureau, 183, 188.
Reed, Enos B., 37.
Reed, Myron Winslow: 26-7, 39-40, 44, 46, 48, 53-5, 62-3, 67, 86, 98, 118, 125, 133-4, 145, 151, 167, 175, 179, 204, 263, 275, 280, 301-5, 342, 375-6; death, 377.
Reedy, William, 377.
Remarkable Man, The, 56, 59, 211, 330.
Respectfully Declined Papers of the Buzz Club, 34.
Reveries of a Rhymer, 136.
Rhymes of Childhood, 136, 208, 280-4, 337, 345, 397.
Richards, Samuel, 164.
Ridpath, John Clark, comment on Riley, 333.
Riley, James Whitcomb: as actor, 1-5; as reader, 5-22; influence of Longfellow, 8; influence of Dickens, 8; appearance at Monrovia, 9-13; at Anderson, 14; at Kokomo, 19-22; as newspaper man, 23-40; as friend, 41-55; at Bloomington, 47; on homesickness, 74-5; on Robert G. Ingersoll, 78-80; on the lecture platform, 77-99; on Luther Benson, 79-80; influence of Longfellow, 81; Poet Laureate of Indiana, 81; on poetry, 81-9; début in Indianapolis, 1879, 89-94; at Galva, Ill., 95; workshops, 101-117; letter to mother, 102; letter to H. S. Taylor, 108; friendship with Ella Wheeler Wilcox, 112-115; on sectional prejudice, 122-4; influence of Charles A. Dana, 125-30; letter to E. W. Wilcox, 135; letter to young writer, 137-8; letter to Mary L. Dodds, 138-9; pen names, 141, 143, 146; first book, 159; letter to Robert U. Johnson, 166; letter to Joel Chandler Harris, 167; description by Myron Reed, 167; description by self, 168-9; influence of Dickens, 172; letter to George C. Hitt, 178; on New England, 181-2; letter to Lewis D. Hayes, 189-90; letter to Hitt, 189; letter to Reed about Matthew Arnold, 193; letter to Hitt, 202; letter to Browning, 210; letter to Bill Nye, 218; characterizations of Lowell, Clemens, Stoddard, Eggleston, Howells, Stockton, Cable, Curtis, Warner, Page, Collyer, 224; toast at W. A. W. dinner, 1888, 229; letter to Dana, 232; Riley-Nye combination, 1886, 234; letter to Hitt,

237; second appearance in New York, 242-4; with Nye at Macon, Ga., 245; story of soldier, 246; with Nye at Louisville, 246; at Indianapolis, 1889, 247; at Springfield, program, 250; partnership dissolved, 257; letter to Dan Paine, 264; decline of power, 273; as business man, 276; financial prosperity, 276; criticism in *Atlanta Constitution*, 279; effect of city life, 279; letter to Edward Bok about *Rhymes of Childhood*, 282; habits of eating, 287; letter to Stoddard, 288; letter to Holstein family, 294, 296; moves to Lockerbie Street, 290; advice to young poets, 300; visit to England, 1891, 301; love of home, 301; on English art, 302; inspiration from homely subjects, 302-8; fear of lack of appreciation, 309; method of production, 315-8; influence of William Blake, 319; influence of night, 319-21; belief in inspiration, 324-8; choice of life-work, 330; book-building, 337-52; letter to Madison Cawein, 337; letter to Ras Wilson, 338; letter to Dr. W. C. Cooper, 339; letter to William C. Edgar, 339; habits of production, 340; publications, 345; letter to Louise C. Moulton, 348; in Civil War days, 353-56; birthday, 1891, 357; at Grant celebration, 359-62; toast at ex-President Harrison's reception, 362-4; dedication of Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, Indianapolis, 365-7; philosophy, 368; histrionic ability, 369-72; death of father (1894), 372; at Greenfield in 1896, 372-5; story about miner, 373; at Denver in 1896, 376; at Boston in 1897, 377-9; at Washington, 1899, 379; program at Chicago, 1900, 380-4; at Authors' Readings, Indianapolis, 1902, 383; tour of 1903, 385-8; honors, Yale's degree, 389-92; University of Pennsylvania, 1904, 392-3; Riley and revivalist, 395; religion, 395-6; 1912 greeting to school children, 399; gift to Indianapolis of site for Public Library, 397; election to American Academy of Arts and Letters, 398; state celebration of Riley Day, 398; letter to Indianapolis school children, 398; 1913, reception at Music Hall, Cincinnati, 402; 1913, given keys to Anderson, 400-2; birthday celebration in 1915, Governor's proclamation and program, 403-6; death, 411.
Riley, Margaret, 130.
Robert Clarke and Company, 161.
Rochester Chronicle, criticism of Riley and Nye tour, 252.
Rockville, Indiana, 94.
Romance of a Waterbury Watch, The, 234.
Romancin', 25.
Rough Diamond, The, 4.
Rubaiyat of Doc Sifers, The, 345-6.
Russell, Sol Smith, 13.

St. Botolph Club, 179.
St. Louis Mirror, 377.

St. Nicholas Magazine, 118, 136.
Scribner's Sons Publishing Co., 345.
Sermon of a Rose, The, 118, 277.
Shakespeare, William, 333.
Shower, The, 30, 135.
Silent Victors, The, 31, 53.
Sketches in Prose, 214, 345.
Sleep, 30.
Sleeping Beauty, A, 32, 116.
Smith, Wycliffe, 203, 208.
Soldier, The, 365.
Soldiers Here To-day, quoted, 357.
Song I Never Sing, The, 55.
Song of Yesterday, 136.
South Wind and the Sun, The, 113.
Spencer, Indiana, 46.
Squire Hawkins's Story, 60.
Stein, Evaleen, 384.
Stockton, Robert, 215.
Stoddard, Charles Warren, 287-8.
Story of a Bad Boy, 280.
Sulgrove, Berry, 93.
Sumner, Charles, 376.

Tale of a Spider, A, 109.
Tales of the Ocean, 342.
Tarkington, Booth: 211-12, 229, 331, 370; tribute to Riley, 384, 394.
Taylor, Howard S., 95.
Temple Talks, 179.
Tennyson, Alfred, 206.
Terre Haute Courier, 62.
Terrill, William H., 326.
Terry, Ellen, 242.
Tharp's Pond, 319.
Thomas, Edith M., 165.
Thompson, Denman, 244.
Thompson, Maurice: 23, 27; criticism of Riley, 278.
Thompson, Richard W., 56.
Tile Club, 180.
To J. W. R. (Kipling) quoted, 284.
To Robert Burns, 55.
Tom Johnson's Quit, 25, 127.
Tom Sawyer, 280.
Tom Van Arden, 32, 347.
Toodles, 3.
Tradin' Joe, 85-6, 262.
Travelers' Rest, 154.
Tree Toad, The, 32, 77.

Tremont Temple, 177.
Trowbridge, J. T., 146-7.

Under the Gaslight, 2.

Van Dyke, Henry, Western spirit, 312-3, 331, 405.
Van Zile, Edward S., 264.
Vawter, Will, 340.
Vinton Block, 103.
Voorhees, Daniel W., 56.

W. A. W., 229.
Wait, 121.
Walker Poems, 30.
Walker, John C., 143-4.
Wallace, Lew, 327, 365, 384.
Walsh, John, 54.
Wandering Jew, The, 127, 294.
Ward, Artemus, 195.
Washington Post, 379-80.
Watches of the Night, 347.
Watterson, Henry: 332; on Grant, 362; letter to Riley on birthday, 1915, 409.
Way We Walk, The, 70.
Wells, Carolyn, 409.
Western Association of Writers, dinner, 1888, 228, 229.
Western Lyceum Agency, 255.
'Wet Weather Talk, 202.
When the Frost Is on the Punkin', 176, 222.
Where Is Mary Alice Smith, 70.
White, William Allen, 406.
Whitlock, Brand, 405.
Whittier, John Greenleaf, 389.
Whittleford Letters, 28-9, 102, 131.
Wide-Awake, 118.
Wilcox, Ella Wheeler: 71; friendship with Riley, 112-15; description of Riley, 114, 291.
Willard, Frances, comment on *Bereaved*, 325-6.
'William McKinley, 357.
Wilson, Ras, 387.
Wilson, Robert Burns, 293.
Wilson, Woodrow, letter to Riley on birthday, 1915, 409.
Wizard Oil Company, 223.
Writers' Singing Bee, 229.

Xenia, Ohio, 48.

Yankee Blade, 109.

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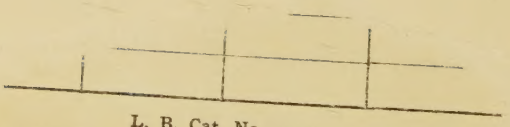

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